

# India gets first military outpost on foreign soil

## Acquisition Of Tajik Base Will Spread Indian Military's Wings

By Mahendra Ved/TNN

**New Delhi:** India's first-ever military outpost on foreign soil, located at Farkhor, about 10 km outside Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, is ready to become operational by this year-end, without any fanfare.

Reliable sources in the government say the Indian Air Force is pressing for an early decision on a suitable aircraft to be stationed at this military base. Operational requirements stipulate at least two squadrons to be



stationed there. Logically, experts say, IAF could opt for MiG-29s that are already in its inventory and can be flown in and out of the region.

Although Indian officials are not willing to discuss the importance of the Farkhor military base, foreign analysts have noted that the acquisition of the military base in Tajikistan would certainly give the Indian armed forces a longer strategic reach. Defence sources describe it as a "modern" military base where 95% of the infrastructure is in place. The runway, the blast pans and the control tower are ready.

The Army is also into this exercise, having operated a military hospital there, basically to nurse the Northern Alliance soldiers who fought the Taliban regime in neighbouring Afghanistan between 1997 and 2001.

It was to this hospital that Ahmed Shah Massoud, the last of the anti-Taliban resistance leader, was brought dead after Al Qaida's emissaries, posing as TV journalists, killed him in an explosion three years ago.

The military base is the outcome of considerable behind-the-scenes work by the external affairs ministry, clinched after the US, which marked a big military presence in Central Asia in the wake of 9/11, preferred not to establish a base.

Work by then defence minister George Fernandes led to a bilateral agreement being signed in 2002 during then PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to Tajikistan.

Even before 9/11, Tajik President Emamoli Rakhmanov has been visiting India. The two countries share common security threat perceptions. Although Russia's 82nd Motorised Division guards the Tajik border with

Afghanistan, the bilateral agreement stipulates the presence of both Indian Army and IAF personnel who will also assist in warding off any threat to Tajikistan.

Besides its strategic importance, the base would help ferry men and material for the increasing Indian oil interests in the Central Asian region, officials say.

Pakistani media reports indicate that President Pervez Musharraf has in the past conveyed his concerns about the Indian base in Tajikistan, mentioning that aircraft taking off from Farkhor could be over the Pak skies within minutes. But Indian officials argue that all Central Asian countries are geographically close to both India and Pakistan and that the Indian presence in the region is not Pakistan-specific.

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