



Russia in Review: July 7 – July 20

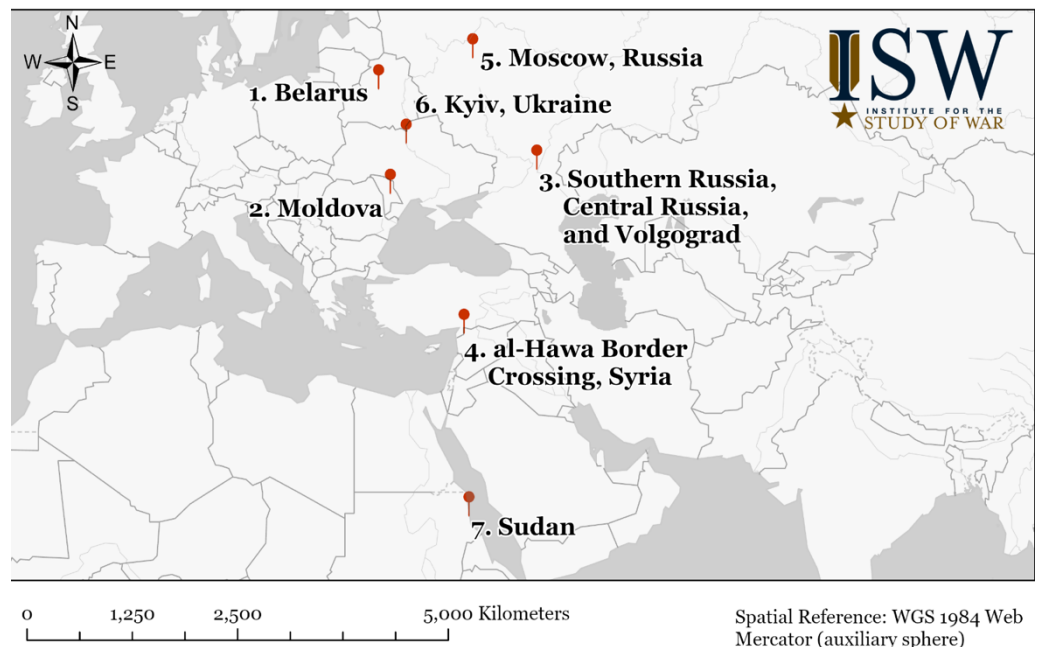
By Mason Clark and Rachel Kenny
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Russia Expands Military Presence in Central Asia in Response to Afghan Instability

The Kremlin is increasing its military presence and diplomatic outreach in Central Asia to prevent Taliban-led violence from destabilizing former Soviet states. The Kremlin aims to contain instability created by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Taliban advances within Afghanistan itself. Potential refugee flows, Taliban advances beyond Afghanistan, or the creation of safe havens for jihadist groups to strike across Central Asia could all threaten the Kremlin's campaign to maintain dominant influence over Central Asia.

Russia's military base in Tajikistan began regular military exercises on July 6 near the Afghan border that are scheduled to continue into August. The Taliban rapidly gained control of most districts within Badakhshan and Takhar provinces, bordering

Russia Around the Globe



Tajikistan, in early July.¹ Russian troops at the 201st Military Base in Dushanabe, Tajikistan—Russia's only formal international military base—have held regular military exercises since July 6.² The Kremlin announced that Russia began constructing and providing funding for modernized border posts on the Tajik-Afghan border on July 14.³ The 201st Military Base will hold joint exercises with Tajikistan and

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Uzbekistan at the Tajik-Afghan border from August 5 to 10.⁴ Kremlin-backed media outlet Izvestiya reported on July 15 that the Russian military will hold several joint exercises in August and September with Central Asian militaries through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to practice repelling jihadist groups from Afghanistan.⁵

The Kremlin assesses that its current forces in Tajikistan are sufficient to stabilize the border but retains the option of deploying additional forces, potentially leveraging the CSTO. The Russian Foreign Ministry stated that Russia’s existing forces in Tajikistan can stabilize the border without external support on July 6, but caveated that Russia will undertake “additional efforts” if needed.⁶ The Tajik government submitted an official request for CSTO military assistance on July 7, citing an inability to handle the situation independently.⁷ The head of the CSTO Joint Staff said July 8 that the CSTO will provide technical assistance but does not need to deploy joint military forces.⁸ The Kremlin retains the option of deploying the CSTO Rapid Reaction Force—which it has prioritized integrating into Russian command structures since mid-2020—if it assesses existing Russian troops are no longer sufficient.⁹ The CSTO and SCO exercises scheduled for August and September are likely intended to prepare for this contingency, or could themselves support the deployment of international troops under the cover of exercises.

The Kremlin in part seeks to mitigate the legitimate security risk of violence in Afghanistan spreading into the former Soviet states. The Kremlin maintains that it does not intend to conduct operations inside Afghanistan and called on the Taliban to “prevent the spread of tensions” beyond Afghanistan’s borders during a meeting with Taliban officials in Moscow on July 8.¹⁰ The Russian military has publicly discussed the risks to Russia of a US withdrawal from Afghanistan for several years.¹¹ Russian military exercises since 2018 have increasingly prepared to

combat jihadist groups that could exploit instability to strike targets in the former Soviet Union.¹² Russian military exercises and potential new deployments are in large part responses to this legitimate threat.

The Kremlin’s military deployments in Central Asia threaten US interests. The Kremlin will likely seek to expand its military base in Tajikistan and establish basing in neighboring Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan in the next 6 months. Additional Russian bases in Central Asia and further military cooperation will support Russia’s campaign to integrate the militaries of the former Soviet Union under Russian structures. The Kremlin is additionally likely maneuvering against Ankara’s efforts to establish Turkey as a significant player in Central and South Asia, as well as pushing back on Chinese influence in the former Soviet Union. Finally, the Kremlin does not share NATO’s objectives in Central Asia and will not be a reliable counterterrorism partner in the region.

Russia Around the Globe

1. **Belarusian authorities began a coordinated campaign of countrywide raids against Belarusian media and NGO groups in mid-July.** The Belarusian KGB announced the start of a “large-scale operation to cleanse radicals” on July 8.¹³ Belarusian security forces began raiding dozens of Belarusian journalists and human rights activists across Belarus on July 8; those raids were ongoing as of July 20.¹⁴ Belarusian forces additionally raided the Minsk bureau of the US Government-sponsored Radio Free Europe media outlet.¹⁵ Belarusian authorities notably released most detainees within a day of their arrest, in contrast to typical prolonged detention. Belarusian authorities have not conducted targeted raids at this scale since fall 2020, at the peak of popular protests. Many of the targeted groups do

not have direct ties to the protest organizers or opposition media outlets that the Belarusian regime has previously targeted. Self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is likely targeting all independent media or non-government organizations, regardless of their past activities, to degrade the opposition's will and deter further support for the opposition. Lukashenko's crackdown will further isolate Belarus, deepening his reliance on support from Russia. Lukashenko met Russian President Vladimir Putin for an unannounced July 13 meeting in Russia to discuss further Russian economic support to Belarus, and likely further Belarusian concessions to Russia, in response to tightening Western sanctions.¹⁶

2. **Moldova's pro-Western party won an absolute majority in snap parliamentary elections as the Kremlin abandoned its preferred political proxy.** Pro-Western Moldovan President Maia Sandu's Action and Solidarity party won an absolute majority over the pro-Russia Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) party in snap parliamentary elections on July 12.¹⁷ Sandu called for snap elections in April 2021 after PSRM blocked two prime minister appointees following her election in November 2020.¹⁸ Action and Solidarity's majority will enable Sandu to increase cooperation with the EU to combat corruption in Moldova and grow trade ties, two of Sandu's key campaign promises.¹⁹ The Kremlin stated that it respects the election results and will work with the new government, despite its pre-election claims of "ongoing EU interference."²⁰ The Kremlin has steadily withdrawn support for PSRM following a string of setbacks since November 2019.²¹ The Kremlin will likely adapt to the loss of its preferred political proxy and increase its engagement with

Sandu's pro-Western—but not necessarily anti-Kremlin—government to maintain its interests in Moldova, including energy contracts and the presence of Russian troops in the breakaway region of Transnistria.

3. **The Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) began "Zaslou-2021," its first-ever operational-strategic exercise, in July to prepare for participation in the Russian military's Zapad-2021 exercise in September.** The exercise will occur in several regions of southwest Russia from July 12 to July 30.²² Zaslou-2021 is Rosgvardia's first operational-strategic exercise since its establishment in 2016 and is explicitly intended to prepare Rosgvardia for participation in the Russian military's annual capstone exercise Zapad-2021, scheduled to begin in September.²³ Rosgvardia reports directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin and is intended to counter internal threats such as protests, terrorists, and what the Kremlin frames as Western-backed support for "color revolutions" within Russia.²⁴ The Kremlin will likely continue to prioritize integrating Rosgvardia into major military exercises to counter perceived threats from terrorist groups or claimed NATO subversion.
4. **Russia reversed course on vetoing a UN Security Council resolution for maintaining the final international aid delivery point to Syria not controlled by the Assad regime.** The Kremlin voted on July 9 to extend international aid deliveries through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in opposition-controlled Idlib Province on the Turkish-Syrian border, the final UN aid crossing into Syria not controlled by the Assad regime.²⁵ The resolution maintains the crossing for six months with an option for a six-month extension. The Kremlin threatened to veto the

resolution prior to the vote, asserting that an international crossing point violates Syrian sovereignty.²⁶ The Kremlin may have withdrawn its veto in an effort to secure concessions from the United States. The Kremlin praised “coordinated efforts” between the United States and Russia on Syria following a call between President Putin and President Biden on July 9. Russia’s UN ambassador stated the vote was “in the spirit” of the Geneva summit between Putin and Biden.²⁷ The Kremlin’s short-term concession does not remove the Kremlin’s leverage in Idlib. Continuing Russian and pro-Assad strikes on civilian infrastructure and limited aid deliveries will amplify the humanitarian crisis in Idlib. The Kremlin retains the ability to increase offensive operations against Idlib to pressure Turkey’s proxies in Syria and create the threat of a refugee influx.

5. **Russian President Vladimir Putin published an essay cementing his view of Russia-Ukraine relations.** The Kremlin published the essay directly on July 12.²⁸ The essay argues that Russians and Ukrainians are one people and claimed that Ukraine can only be sovereign in partnership with Russia. Putin claims Ukraine’s separate national identity has been “fabricated” by Europe to divide Ukraine from Russia. He further claimed the West and Ukrainian elites have created the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia—in which Russia illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula and controls proxy forces in occupied eastern Ukraine—and seek to exploit Ukraine economically. Kremlin-run media has subsequently claimed that the essay positively argues for close cooperation between Russia and Ukraine, despite Putin’s overt rejection of Ukraine’s existence as a national polity.²⁹ The Russian government has taken several steps to elevate the article, including Defense Minister Shoigu

issuing an order for Russian military personnel to study the essay.³⁰ The essay is likely intended to outline the Kremlin’s preferred framing of Ukraine for a domestic Russian audience and the Russian government, rather than directly change Ukraine’s relationship with Russia.

6. **Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky replaced Ukraine’s powerful interior minister to reform the Ukrainian security services and remove a rival from power.** The replaced minister, Arsen Avakov, resigned on July 15 after serving in the position for over 7 years.³¹ Avakov developed a significant independent power base through his control of the interior ministry and was the only Ukrainian minister to serve under both President Zelensky and former President Petro Poroshenko.³² Avakov is deeply unpopular in Ukraine due to numerous high-profile scandals and corruption allegations, including a longstanding failure to address police brutality.³³ Avakov was the greatest counterweight to Ukrainian President Zelensky’s Servant of the People (SoP) party within the Ukrainian government, and insiders familiar with the event suggest that the two agreed on private terms surrounding Avakov’s resignation.³⁴ Zelensky replaced Avakov with Servant of the People MP Denys Monastyrsky.³⁵ SoP stated Monastyrsky will pursue institutional reform and split up the centralized Ukrainian law enforcement agencies that Avakov refused to implement.³⁶ Zelensky likely replaced Avakov to eliminate his entrenched institutional power and further consolidate control over the Ukrainian government in addition to the legitimate goal of instituting these reforms.

7. **Russia will likely secure a basing agreement in Sudan despite hesitancy from the Sudanese government, expanding Russian power projection capabilities in the Indian Ocean.** Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with Sudanese Foreign Minister Mariam Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi in Moscow on July 12. The meeting focused on cooperation between Russia and Sudan in the UN and on ongoing conflicts in Libya and Syria. Lavrov and Al-Mahdi confirmed that their governments will start the ratification process of an agreement, previously announced in November 2020, allowing Russia to construct a naval base in Sudan.³⁷ Sudan previously announced in June 2021 it would review the agreement to ensure that it benefited Sudan.³⁸ It is unclear from available

sources why Sudan dropped its objections to the basing agreement or if Sudan secured concessions from Russia. A Russian naval base in Sudan will enable further Russian power projection in Africa and support the Russian Navy's

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efforts to reestablish a global footprint.

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⁹ George Barros, "Russia in Review: Putin's 'Peacekeepers Will Support Russian Wars,"] *Institute for the Study of War*, November 16, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-putins-%E2%80%9Cpeacekeepers%E2%80%9D-will-support-russian-wars>.

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²³ "Operational-strategic exercise" is a Russian term for a large military exercise occurring in multiple locations, combining staff exercises with field deployments. The term has previously been used to identify the Russian military's major annual exercises. Zaslon-2021 is Rosgvardia's first use of the term.

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