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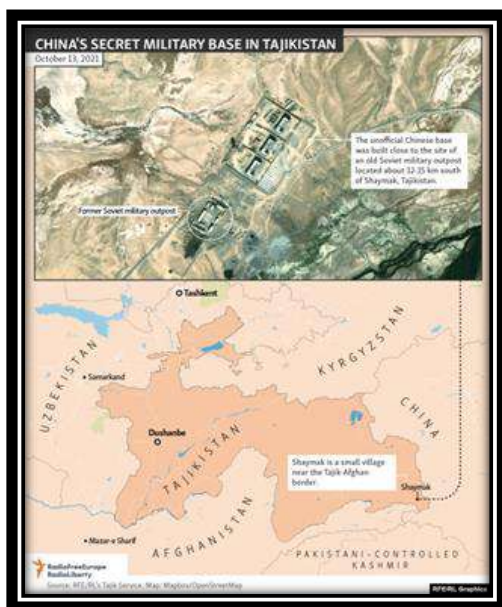
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Tajikistan approves construction of a new Chinese-funded military base

On 27 Oct 2021, the lower house of Tajikistan's Supreme Assembly approved a plan to establish a new border security base with Chinese funding which is part of a larger deal between the country's Interior Ministry and China's Public Security Ministry. In a separate development, the Tajik government offered to transfer full control of a pre-existing Chinese military base in the country to Beijing and waive any future rent in exchange for military aid from China. The two developments paint a picture of a growing Chinese military footprint in the Central Asian country as a broader response from Beijing to the newly emerging security situation following the Taliban's takeover of neighbouring Afghanistan.



In 2016 China formed the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) with Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan as a vehicle for intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism. The Chinese military presence in Tajikistan has been reported to be an arrangement within the ambit of QCCM and aims to insulate its restive Xinjiang Province from Uyghur extremists using Afghanistan as a staging ground for attacks on Chinese targets in the region. While the full scope of the threat posed by Uyghur militants remains unclear, the prospect of terrorist threats spreading from Afghanistan remain a central concern for Chinese policymakers.

Though authorities in Dushanbe and Beijing have repeatedly denied it, it has been widely reported that the two countries have been running a separate joint border security base in Gorno-Badakhshan, since at least 2016. As per media reports, the proposal to transfer ownership of the base to China was presented by Tajik President Emomali Rahmon to Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe when he visited the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, in July.

Beijing is navigating a delicate security situation in the region since the Taliban takeover. China has a pragmatic working relationship with the group, but it remains to be seen how closely the Taliban will cooperate on counterterrorism issues with Chinese authorities. Some reports have suggested that China might be looking to establish bases inside Afghanistan. Notwithstanding constant assurance from Taliban about not robust action against like the Uyghur-founded East Turkestan Islamic Movement, it's not hard to see why China would want its own robust security presence in the region to gather intelligence and provide a staging point to take more direct action, should it decide that is necessary.

In sharp contrast to Beijing's pragmatic approach towards the Taliban, Tajik-Taliban relation has witnessed tumultuous sign since the Taliban take over. Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon has been sharply critical of the Taliban and has expressed his apprehension that "Afghanistan is once again on the path to becoming a breeding ground for international terrorism." Taliban officials in

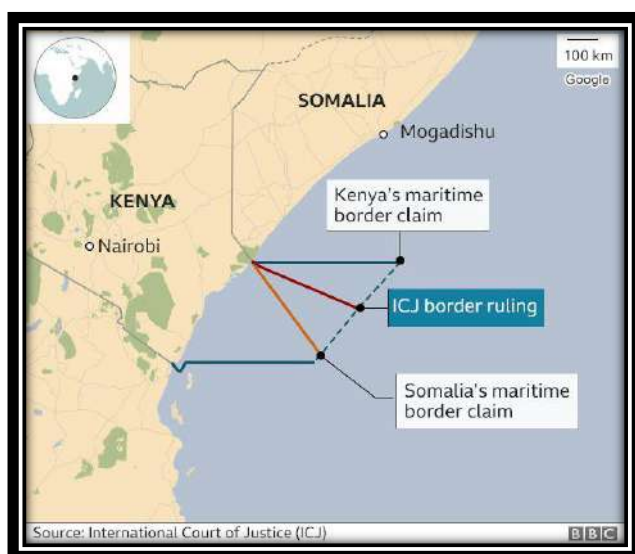
response have warned of a “neighbouring nation” attempting to meddle in Afghanistan’s affairs. Taliban perceptions that Tajikistan is aiding the resistance to its dominion in Afghanistan turn the heat up further on the border. In early October 21, the Russian Foreign Ministry had expressed “concern the growing tension in Tajik-Afghan relations amid mutually harsh statements by the two countries’ leaders.” China has thus far avoided any comments on Tajik-Taliban relations.

The new security deals between Tajikistan and China appear to reflect significant geopolitical shifts in the region, both concerning Afghanistan specifically and the Chinese government's interest in expanding its influence substantially abroad. The deal also highlights how Central Asia is going to be a major focus of Chinese attention. Going forward, Beijing may struggle to avoid getting itself entangled in regional security problems.

ICJ verdict on Kenya-Somalia maritime boundary dispute

On 12 October, the UN International Court of Justice delivered a long-awaited judgment on a prolonged dispute between Kenya and Somalia over their maritime boundaries in the Indian Ocean. In the judgment, the court ruled largely in favour of Somalia by dismissing Kenya’s argument that Somalia had already agreed to its claimed boundary. In a lengthy judgment, judges at the top UN court ruled that there was “no agreed maritime boundary” in force, and drew a new borderline close to the one previously proposed by Somalia. While the court handed most of the disputed territory to Somalia, it also shifted part of the border north by a bit, in line with Kenya’s demand.

Somalia's President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed described the court's decision as a historic victory. Kenya which had earlier withdrawn from the court proceeding called it “the culmination of a flawed judicial process,” that would have a profound impact on regional security and politics.



The disputed offshore area, which covers about 62,000 square miles, is thought to have vast deposits of oil and gas that could offer a big boost to the economy of whichever country controls it. The area is also rich in fish, and a shift in the maritime borders could mean the loss of livelihoods for some fishing communities in Kenya particularly those in Lamu County. At the core of the dispute is the direction of the line in the maritime boundary delineation. Somalia believes that the boundary should follow its land

border and head out in a southeasterly direction. Kenya believes that the line runs in a straight easterly direction of its coastline, essentially granting it rights to the portion of the sea in question.

Kenya has over years maintained that a maritime boundary agreement has always existed since 1979, and has been pushing for a diplomatic solution to the dispute. However, in 2014, Somalia took Kenya to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) after out of court settlements failed. Both countries are signatories to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The court case has dragged on for close to 7 years, with Nairobi accusing the court of bias after it failed to grant Kenya's request to delay the proceedings. Kenya boycotted the proceedings on March 21, when its request to delay the proceedings due to COVID-19 was denied.

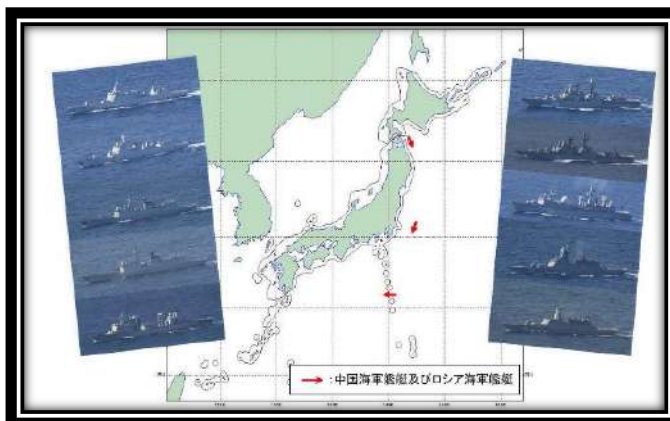
The court ruling adds to a long list of challenges already testing relations between Kenya and Somalia... For Kenyans, the Somali claims are part of what they call their neighbour's "resurgent expansionist agenda," a reference to a secessionist conflict from the 1960s by ethnic Somalis along the border with Somalia. Kenya also feels that its contributions towards stabilizing Somalia remain unappreciated. Kenya in 2019 recalled its ambassador to Mogadishu after accusing Somalia of selling off oil and gas blocks in the contested area. Somalia has long bristled at what it calls Kenya's meddling in regions over its border, while Nairobi has accused Mogadishu of using it as a scapegoat for its political problems.

Article 94 of the U.N. charter states that member states should comply with the court's decisions and that any party should seek recourse from the Security Council if the other party fails to perform its obligations. While the court's rulings are final and without appeal, it has no way of enforcing them. Kenya has thus far maintained that it would not be bound by this ruling by ICJ. Notwithstanding its commitment to resolving the dispute through "amicable negotiations", Kenya's truculence over the verdict poses a complex challenge to international legal norms and rule-based order in the maritime realm.

Russia China Joint Patrol in the Western Pacific circumnavigates Japan

On 23 October 2021, Russian and Chinese warships have conducted the first-ever joint patrol in the western part of the Pacific Ocean. As per the statement by the Russian defence ministry, the patrols involved a total of 10 warships, five from each nation, and lasted a week, from Sunday, October 17 to Saturday, October 23, covering 1,700 nautical miles, according to the Ministry. The objective of the joint patrol was to "demonstrate the state flags of Russia and China, maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and also protect facilities of both countries' maritime economic activity," the statement read.

The convoy consisted of five Chinese vessels -- one Renhai-class destroyer, one Luyang-III-class destroyer, two Jiangkai-class frigates and one Fuchi-class replenishment oiler -- and five Russian vessels, including two Udaloy-class destroyers, two Steregushchiy-class corvettes and one Marshal Nedelin-class missile-tracking ship.



"During the patrol, the group of warships passed through the Tsugaru Strait for the first time," the statement added. The Tsugaru Strait is a body of water between the Japanese islands of Honshu and Hokkaido in the northern part of the country, connecting the Sea of Japan with the Pacific Ocean. In addition to the patrol, the two navies practised joint tactical manoeuvres and did a series of military drills, the statement added.

Earlier in a joint exercise in 2013, Chinese warships entered the Sea of Japan for the drills via the Tsushima Strait, and after the drills, some participating vessels sailed through the Soya Strait into the Pacific Ocean, before returning to the East China Sea from the Miyako Strait. However, this is the first time, Russian and Chinese warships have in effect circumnavigated Japan.

In a statement, the Japanese Defense Ministry's Joint Staff said 10 vessels passed westward through the Osumi Strait between Osumi Peninsula and Tanegashima Island, both in the southern prefecture of Kagoshima, on 22 October 2021. Tokyo said this was the first time Chinese and Russian ships have jointly sailed through the Osumi Strait. These ships had passed through the northern chokepoint Tsugaru Strait that runs between Japan's main Honshu Island and the island of Hokkaido on 18 October 2021. The Japanese side monitored the Chinese and Russian ships by deploying Asagiri-class destroyer JS Yamagiri from Yokosuka, Kanagawa Prefecture, and Abukuma-class destroyer escort ship JS Tone from Kure, Hiroshima Prefecture. A P-1 maritime patrol plane was sent from Kanoya, Kagoshima.

While the Tsugaru Strait and the Osumi Strait are only 3 nautical miles wide, these straits have been characterised as international straits where the passage of warships of other countries remains unhindered as per UNCLOS. However, this coordinated show of strength by Russian and Chinese navies has been seen in the Japanese media as an unprecedented provocative move. It's worth pointing out that China and Russia both have significant ongoing territorial disputes with Japan, among a variety of other geopolitical issues in the region.