
Russia's Foreign Military Basing Strategy

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Dmitry Gorenburg¹

Harvard University; CNA

In December 2020, news broke that Russia had signed an agreement with Sudan to build a naval base on the Red Sea. Given the refurbishment of its existing base in Syria and rumors of other potential bases abroad being negotiated, on the surface, Russia appears to be on a spree of expanding its military footprint abroad. Yet, there is much less to this effort than appears at first glance. The vast majority of Russia's foreign bases are in neighboring former Soviet states, maintained either as legacy Soviet bases or as part of an effort by Russia to retain influence in its near abroad. Despite the various rumors to the contrary, farther afield, Russia much prefers to negotiate access to foreign ports and airfields than to develop and maintain its own bases.

The Soviet Legacy

The Soviet Union had a fairly [extensive network](#) of military bases abroad. Most of them were, of course, located in Warsaw Pact countries, but there were also several bases much farther afield. In Eastern Europe, Soviet military forces, including both ground and air forces, were located in East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia (after 1968), and Hungary (after 1956). Soviet Army forces were also stationed in Mongolia beginning in 1970 and in Afghanistan during the Afghan War from 1979 to 1989. Groups of Soviet military advisors of varying size were also active in a number of socialist allies in the 1970s and 1980s, especially Cuba and Angola.

Soviet naval bases existed for most of the Cold War in Cuba, Syria, and Vietnam. The Soviet Navy also had basing agreements with Albania from 1955-1962, Egypt from 1967-1972, Somalia from 1964-1978, and Ethiopia from 1977-1991. A number of other countries had port access agreements with the Soviet Union, but these did not amount to full-fledged military bases. Soviet air bases at various points included facilities in Egypt,

¹ [Dmitry Gorenburg](#) is Senior Research Scientist at CNA Corporation and Associate at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University.

Ethiopia, Somalia, Yemen, Cuba, Guinea, Angola, and Vietnam. Soviet forces were withdrawn from all of its bases outside Cold War-era Soviet boundaries between 1989 and 1994. What remained thereafter were mostly legacy bases in independent states made up of former Soviet republics.

Where Are Russian Military Bases Located?

When compared to its main competitor, Russia does not have very many military bases abroad. The United States has over 700 military facilities [outside its borders](#), while Russia has less than 20 such facilities. Russia's facilities may be divided into three types: legacy Soviet facilities, new facilities in former Soviet states, and facilities being used for Russian military operations in the Middle East.

The largest set includes legacy facilities left over from the Soviet period. At the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union, most Soviet military facilities were transferred to the military forces of the newly established independent states. Russia withdrew its military from the [Baltic States](#) in the early 1990s and closed its bases in [Georgia](#) in the 2000s, although it retained some peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, Russia kept several bases under its own control. The [key facilities](#) that are left from that period include the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan and the 102nd Military Base and the 3624th Air Base in Armenia. Russia also maintains a number of smaller facilities in former Soviet republics, such as a radar station in Belarus and a missile testing range in Kazakhstan. Russia has also maintained a continuous presence in Transnistria since the early 1990s, justified as needed for its [peacekeeping operation](#) in that region.

Russia has established several military bases as part of its effort to ensure continued Russian influence in neighboring states. In 2003, Russia and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement to base Russian Air Force units at the Kant Air Base, a former Soviet base that had been under Kyrgyz control since 1992. The [long-term lease](#) on this base will keep Russian forces there until at least 2027. After the conclusion of the 2008 Russia-Georgian War, Russia opened the 7th Military Base in Abkhazia and the 4th Guards Military Base in South Ossetia, which together [hosts](#) approximately 8,000 personnel. These facilities absorbed and superseded previously existing Russian peacekeeping operations in those regions. In 2020, Russia [deployed](#) peacekeeping forces to Nagorno-Karabakh as part of the ceasefire agreement signed to end the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Finally, Russia has been expanding its footprint in the Middle East and North Africa. Since the start of its intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia has [established](#) a number of [facilities](#) in Syria, most notably the naval facility in Tartus and the Khmeimim Air Base. The smaller air bases Tiyas and Shayrat also host Russian aircraft and support personnel. It has also been using an unofficial base at [al Jufra](#) in Libya, where it has stationed aircraft that have been used to provide air support for General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army. The

Wagner Group has also used the base as a transport and staging area for its combat and support operations.

Russia's Expanding Military Footprint

Although Russia has maintained and expanded its military presence in neighboring states, its primary basing focus in recent years has been to secure potentially vulnerable areas by building new bases within its borders. Ukraine and the Arctic have been the two primary geographic areas of focus for this effort. Russia's presence near Ukraine has been [strengthened](#) through the construction of new bases in Russian regions bordering Ukraine, such as Voronezh, Belgorod, and Rostov. Russia has, of course, also significantly expanded its military footprint in the annexed region of Crimea to the immediate south of the rest of Ukraine. The location of these military forces ensures that Moscow maintains escalation dominance over neighboring Ukraine and provides the potential to support Russian-backed forces in the Donetsk and Luhansk enclaves.

Military presence in the [Arctic](#) was strengthened through the establishment of the Arctic Joint Strategic Command in December 2014, with a focus on the Northern Fleet. This command was recently transformed into a full-fledged military district, which includes specialized ground force brigades near the borders with Finland and Norway. In the meantime, Russia is [refurbishing](#) abandoned Soviet airfields in remote areas throughout the Arctic and also building some new ones. All of the bases will be capable of receiving large transport, bomber, and ASW aircraft.

Russia's military expansion abroad remains fairly limited in nature when compared to the United States but is relatively extensive when compared to other major powers such as China. There are [rumors](#) that agreements have been reached to transform existing training and assistance relationships with a number of African states into permanent bases. The six countries mentioned in such reporting are CAR, Egypt, Eritrea, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Sudan. Of these, [Sudan](#) has recently confirmed an agreement to allow Russia to establish a naval base on the Red Sea, while Russian officials have confirmed an agreement to establish a logistics center in [Eritrea](#). Russia is known to be seeking a base in [Egypt](#), but no agreement has been reached, and there is some speculation that the decision to establish a naval base in Sudan is a sign that Russian leaders recognize that a base in Egypt is not actually in the cards. The other three are just rumors at this point, with no official confirmation from either side. In Latin America, rumors that Russia was planning to establish a military base in [Venezuela](#) were explicitly denied in 2019 by President Putin, who had earlier denied similar rumors that Russia would return to the old Soviet base at [Lourdes](#) in Cuba.

Russia's Military Basing Strategy

What do the patterns of base placement in recent years say about Russia's overall strategy for the use of force abroad? The focus on maintaining and, in some cases expanding bases in Central Asia, Moldova, and the Caucasus highlights that Russia's primary goal remains to control or at least maintain influence in the countries that previously comprised the Soviet Union. The location of military bases is just one part of a multi-part strategy that also includes stationing peacekeepers in frozen conflict zones and integrating aspects of the region's military forces through the CSTO and joint air defense agreements. Russia has also sought to increase its military footprint in Belarus, though that country's leadership has so far successfully resisted any pressure to establish any permanent Russian facilities on its territory beyond the existing radar station. The establishment of new bases around Ukraine can also be seen as part of this effort, as the forces located there effectively neutralize any threat that Ukraine might try to retake the Luhansk and Donetsk enclaves by force.

Supporting expeditionary operations abroad is very much a secondary goal for Russia. Although it has set up a number of bases to support its operations in Syria and Libya, it has done little to establish a network of air or land bases elsewhere in the world. Instead, it has preferred to work with host countries to send trainers and receive landing rights in areas where it is seeking to expand its influence, such as parts of Africa and Latin America. Access is preferred over bases both because permanent bases require much greater investment and because they carry risks related to appropriating the security challenges presented by the host states.

The one exception to the general tendency to avoid establishing bases abroad is in the naval sphere. Because of the nature of naval operations and their needs for repair and resupply, Russia (and the Soviet Union before it) has long sought to ensure port access around the world for its naval ships. In high-priority areas where the Russian Navy patrols regularly, such as the Mediterranean, this is considered insufficient. To ensure the ability to maintain and resupply the Mediterranean Squadron, actual bases are required. However, this goal is geographically limited. In locales farther afield, such as Southeast Asia and Latin America, the Russian military considers port access agreements sufficient for its logistics requirements and judges cost and risk in much the same way as for landing rights.

Overall, recent patterns in military base construction highlight that Russia's primary focus remains the protection of its own territory rather than overseas expansion. It has invested most heavily in building new bases near vulnerable areas on its own territory, both near Ukraine and in the Arctic. It has also used existing and newly established bases in neighboring states to maintain a de facto buffer zone around its own territory.

These priorities are in part mandated by Russia's geography. Being a large country with a widely dispersed population and limited road and rail links to outlying regions means that overland force transfer takes time, while transfer by air requires the investment of significant resources in appropriate aircraft. Russia has sought to ameliorate this situation to some extent by developing a robust rear base structure and increasing investment in equipment and training related to force mobility, but having military bases near key potential combat zones remains critical for Russia's defense.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Both Russia and the United States use military bases abroad as forms of political influence. But whereas the United States seeks a global presence, as clearly indicated by the global nature of its military footprint, Russia has fewer resources and must therefore pick and choose where to invest. Russia's basing posture thus clearly indicates that its defense priorities are primarily focused on its immediate environs, especially former Soviet states, plus the Eastern Mediterranean. US planners should be less concerned about the possibility of further Russian adventures in far-off foreign locales such as Africa and Latin America and more focused on the regions where Russia is building up its military infrastructures, such as the Arctic and the Middle East.