

1. Ayni Airbase – International Relations

India has shut down its operations at the Ayni airbase in Tajikistan, a key overseas facility that had provided its strategic influence in Central Asia

Background and Historical Development

Origin under the Soviet Era – The Ayni Airbase, located near Dushanbe in Tajikistan, was originally constructed during the Soviet Union's expansion in Central Asia as part of its Cold War military infrastructure.

Post-Soviet Neglect – Following the USSR's disintegration in 1991, the base fell into disuse and disrepair, mirroring Tajikistan's instability during its civil war (1992–1997).

India's Entry (Early 2000s) – Recognizing Tajikistan's geostrategic position near Afghanistan, India began modernizing Ayni Airbase around 2002, investing roughly \$80 million through the Border Roads Organisation (BRO).

Infrastructure Upgradation – India built a 3,200-metre-long runway, hangars, air traffic control towers, fuel storage, and maintenance facilities, making Ayni capable of handling large aircraft such as the Sukhoi-30 MKI.

Strategic Location and Geopolitical Importance

Geographic Significance – Ayni is approximately 20 km from Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip connecting Afghanistan to China and separating Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) from Tajikistan.

Regional Tri-junction – The base sits at a critical crossroads between South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia, close to China's Xinjiang province, thus making it an ideal observation and power-projection point for India.

India's Only Overseas Airbase – Ayni served as India's only full-fledged overseas military base, providing a rare foothold in the heart of Central Asia—a region dominated by Russia and China.

Strategic Leverage – It offered India strategic leverage to monitor developments in Afghanistan, counter Pakistan's regional activities, and balance growing Chinese military presence in the region.

Operational and Strategic Role

Support to Northern Alliance (1990s–2001) – During the anti-Taliban resistance (Northern Alliance era), India used Ayni to channel support, intelligence, and logistical aid to anti-Taliban forces before the U.S.-led intervention in 2001.

Evacuation Operations (2021) – The airbase played a key logistical role for India's evacuation operations after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, proving its strategic value.

Indian Military Presence – At its peak, around 200 Indian military personnel were stationed at Ayni, alongside deployments of Sukhoi-30 MKI fighter jets on rotation, reinforcing India's deterrence posture.

Regional Power Projection – Ayni enabled India to project limited but visible air power in Central Asia, a region otherwise dominated by Russia (via CSTO) and China (via SCO and Belt and Road Initiative).

Reasons Behind India's Withdrawal

End of Bilateral Agreement – India's rehabilitation and operational agreement for the Ayni base concluded in 2022. The Tajik government did not renew the lease, marking a quiet end to India's operational presence.

Geopolitical Pressure – Analysts suggest that Russia and China pressured Tajikistan not to extend the lease to India, as both powers seek to limit India's military footprint in their perceived sphere of influence.

Russian Influence – Russia already operates its 201st Motor Rifle Division in Tajikistan—its largest military presence abroad—and likely viewed an Indian base as a strategic intrusion.

China's Expanding Footprint – China has deepened defence cooperation with Tajikistan and is reportedly building a military facility near the Wakhan Corridor, viewing India's presence as counterproductive to its regional ambitions.

Strategic Silence – India's withdrawal was not publicly announced and only became known later through independent satellite imagery and diplomatic sources—reflecting the sensitivity of the decision.

Strategic Implications for India

Setback to Regional Influence – The loss of Ayni is viewed as a strategic setback for India's "Connect Central Asia" policy and its broader ambitions to balance China and Pakistan in the region.

Reduced Intelligence and Access – With Ayni gone, India's direct air access to Afghanistan and Central Asia is diminished, especially after the Taliban's return in Kabul in 2021.

Symbolic Decline of Footprint – The withdrawal underscores India's limited hard-power projection capability compared to China, which continues to expand its bases in Asia and Africa.

Reallocation of Focus – India appears to be shifting focus toward maritime strategic assets, especially in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), where it holds stronger influence and logistical advantage.

Comparative Perspective – Other Nations' Overseas Bases

China – Operates an official base in Djibouti (Horn of Africa). Reportedly constructing another in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region near the Afghan border. Uses dual-use port infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for potential military purposes.

United States – Maintains 100+ overseas bases across the globe, including in Germany, Japan, Qatar, Bahrain, and South Korea, forming the backbone of its global power projection.

Russia – Retains strong military presence in Tajikistan, Armenia, Syria, and the Crimean Peninsula, reinforcing its traditional dominance in Central Asia.

India's Current Overseas Strategic Presence

No Permanent Base Abroad – Following Ayni's withdrawal, India currently operates no permanent overseas military base.

Agaléga Islands (Mauritius, 2024) – India inaugurated a strategic airstrip and jetty on the Agaléga Islands, enhancing surveillance and maritime reach in the western Indian Ocean.

1. It provides logistical support for the Indian Navy's aircraft and P-8I patrol operations.
2. Strengthens India's capability to monitor African east coast and Mozambique Channel—a vital shipping route.

Military Training Missions – India maintains a Military Training Team (IMTRAT) in Bhutan, providing training to the Royal Bhutan Army and Bodyguard units.

Historic Temporary Deployments

1971 War – Indian aircraft and naval assets temporarily operated from Bangladesh (then East Pakistan).

1987–1990 – The Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) mission operated from Sri Lankan bases during the civil conflict.

Future Outlook – India's Strategic Adjustments

Pivot to the Indian Ocean – India's maritime focus, reflected in the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine and Mission-Based Deployments, compensates for reduced continental presence.

Strengthening Partnerships – India is deepening defence partnerships with Oman (Duqm Port), France (Reunion Island), and Indonesia (Sabang Port) for access and logistics rights rather than full bases.

Central Asia Engagement – Despite losing Ayni, India continues engagement through the India–Central Asia Dialogue, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and Chabahar Port Project in Iran for connectivity.

Lessons Learned – The Ayni experience highlights the challenges of sustaining military presence in contested geopolitical zones without full host-nation backing or multilateral cover.

Source – <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-ayni-airbase-10353656/>