Ayni Airbase in Tajikistan – India's First Overseas Military Footprint

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1. Background and Context

- **Location:** Ayni Airbase is located near Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan (about 15–20 km west).
- **Significance:** It was India's *only overseas military facility*, representing a unique experiment in projecting Indian military and strategic power beyond South Asia.
- **Current status:** Two decades after its establishment, India's operational presence at Ayni has reportedly come to an end — marking the closure of India's first and only foreign military base initiative.

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2. Geopolitical Setting and Origins

(a) Post-9/11 Geopolitical Context

- After the **9/11 attacks (2001)** and the subsequent **U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan**, global geopolitics opened new alignments in Central Asia.
- India sought to play a more active role in the region to secure its long-term strategic interests, especially amid growing U.S., Russian, and Chinese activity there.

(b) Kargil War Lessons (1999)

- The **Kargil Review Committee (1999)** highlighted deficiencies in India's:
    - Intelligence gathering,
    - Early warning systems, and
    - Strategic reach beyond its immediate neighbourhood.
- Strengthening India's presence in **Central Asia** was viewed as a way to enhance **strategic depth** and **surveillance capacity** against threats from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

(c) Strategic Vision under Vajpayee Government

- The government of **Atal Bihari Vajpayee (2002)** acted on advice from

strategic thinkers who advocated power projection *beyond the subcontinent*.

- Tajikistan, geographically central to Eurasia and close to Afghanistan, was seen as a natural partner.

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3. Development of the Ayni Airbase

(a) Infrastructure Investment

- India, through its **Air Force and Border Roads Organisation (BRO)**, invested **around $70 million** to upgrade and reconstruct the base.
- Upgrades included:
    - A **3,200-meter runway** capable of handling most military aircraft.
    - **New hangars, fuel depots, and maintenance facilities.**
- These developments turned Ayni into a **fully operational dual-use airbase**.

(b) Strategic Capabilities

- The base's location provided:
    - Proximity to **Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK)** — about 20 km via the Wakhan Corridor.
    - Easy access to **Afghanistan's northern border**, enabling monitoring and rapid deployment potential.
- Symbolically, it marked India's ability to **operate west of the Himalayas without depending on Pakistan** for transit routes.

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4. Strategic Rationale and Objectives

- **Regional Power Projection:** Establish India as a stakeholder in Central Asian security.
- **Counterterrorism:** Support operations and intelligence in Afghanistan post-9/11.
- **Balancing Influence:** Serve as a counterbalance to Chinese and Pakistani strategic presence.
- **Energy and Connectivity:** Deepen engagement in Central Asia's energy-rich landscape.

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- **Diplomatic Symbolism:** Showcase India as a capable and confident regional power.

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5. Decline of Indian Presence

(a) Russian Reluctance

- Tajikistan remains **within Russia's strategic sphere of influence**.
- Moscow was **reluctant to support a permanent Indian presence** at Ayni, preferring to maintain control through its **201st Motor Rifle Division** stationed there.
- Russia's dominance in Tajikistan's defense policy limited India's operational autonomy.

(b) China's Expanding Role

- The rise of **China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** and its growing security footprint (including a presence near the Tajik-Afghan border) reshaped regional geopolitics.
- Tajikistan's "multi-vector" diplomacy—balancing between powers—tilted toward **Russia and China**, reducing space for India.

(c) Changing Security Context

- The **U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan (2021)** and **Taliban's return** changed the regional strategic environment.
- With diminishing prospects for direct security engagement in Afghanistan, Ayni's operational relevance for India reduced.

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6. Lessons and Strategic Implications

1. **Limits of Indian Power Projection**
    - Demonstrates India's challenges in sustaining overseas bases due to geopolitical constraints, logistics, and competing great-power interests.
2. **Dependence on Regional Powers**
    - Highlights India's reliance on Russia's goodwill for regional access—limiting true strategic autonomy in Eurasia.
3. **Fragility of "Multi-Vector" Diplomacy**

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    - Central Asian states balance between multiple powers; their alignment can shift quickly under pressure from Russia or China.

4. **Need for Hybrid Strategic Models**
    - Future Indian strategy may need to rely more on **dual-use infrastructure**, **defense partnerships**, and **logistical agreements** (like with Oman, Singapore, or France) rather than full-scale bases.

5. **Importance of Connectivity and Partnerships**
    - Strengthening projects like **Chabahar Port**, **International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC)**, and **engagement with SCO** becomes crucial for maintaining strategic access.

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7. Conclusion

- The Ayni Airbase episode stands as a **case study in India's evolving approach to external military presence**.
- It reflects both **India's ambitions** to project power beyond its borders and the **structural constraints** that limit such ambitions in contested geopolitical spaces.
- Going forward, India's focus is likely to shift toward **flexible partnerships, logistical support agreements**, and **regional cooperation mechanisms** instead of permanent overseas bases.

UPSC Relevance

Mains GS Paper II & III Themes:

- International Relations – India and its neighborhood, Central Asia policy
- Security – Strategic depth, power projection, military diplomacy
- India's foreign policy evolution post-Kargil and post-9/11
- Great power competition in Eurasia

Possible UPSC Question:

> *"The story of India's Ayni airbase in Tajikistan reflects both the ambition and constraints of India's power projection in Eurasia." Discuss.*

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