

## Tajikistan's unsettled security: borderland dynamics of the outpost on Russia's Afghan frontier

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# Tajikistan's Unsettled Security: Borderland Dynamics of the Outpost on Russia's Afghan Frontier

*Helena Rytövuori-Apunen and Furugzod Usmonov*

How does Tajikistan seek to survive as a state as well as benefit from the geographic situation in which the uncertainty over the threats and opportunities offered by “Afghanistan after 2016” relates to the wider region's future? Our question arises from the fact that the state that emerged from a devastating civil war during 1992–1997 is still very much internally cleaved. We seek to answer this by studying the action and policies of the state in relation to three problem areas. First, we examine how Tajikistan's recent internal conflicts challenge the state, as represented by its central government and regime. Second, we ask how Tajikistan's relations with Russia evolve against the backdrop of threats that are both internal and external; and, third, we discuss how Tajikistan is utilizing the moment of international cooperation to develop energy infrastructure projects aimed at alleviating the security problem which Afghanistan represents in the region. These three focal points are meant to shed light on the practices that connect Tajikistan with an emerging configuration of regional security. We begin with a brief description of the situation in Tajikistan following the civil war that had left 60,000 dead, 100,000 missing and created 55,000 orphans.

The Peace Accords were agreed upon in June 1997, nine months after the Taliban had taken power in Kabul, Afghanistan. During the next two years, this agreement resulted in the formation of an interim government which included the two main parties of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), namely the moderate Islamists (Party of Islamic Renaissance of Tajikistan, IRPT) and the Pamir party (Lal'i Badakhshan).<sup>1</sup> The core idea of the peace deal was the notion that power-sharing would incorporate the opposition into the central and local military, police and civil bodies on the basis of a thirty-percent quota. This was a political compromise meant to disarm and include the former guerrilla groups in a country-wide regime system cutting through all administrative levels and setting up the basis for the common state. The

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<sup>1</sup> The third party was the small Democratic Party of Tajikistan.

more extreme political Islamist groups fled to Afghanistan and, later, to Pakistan; and the militant anti-Islamists again escaped to Uzbekistan.<sup>2</sup> The peace deal, which had been brokered by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with the UN, thus remained under pressure from both sides from across the borders. The following decades did not consolidate the formula meant to establish legitimacy for a national state. In late August 2015, an order by the Ministry of Justice banned the IRPT, which since 1999 had been the only officially registered Islamic party in Central Asia and which had been poised to win the position of the second largest party in the country in the spring 2015 parliamentary elections. One month later, Tajikistan's Supreme Court declared the party to be an extremist and a terrorist organization.<sup>3</sup> The peace deal, which over many years was seen to set an example for Afghanistan, had ultimately failed, and the secular regime that had established its power already during the civil war with Russia's support prevailed alone in an increasingly polarizing country.

The political polarization which sets the supporters of a secular regime against various pro-Islamic forces intertwines with the dividing lines between regions where, during the civil war, armed groups fought for either the control of central power in Dushanbe or for greater autonomy from it. In the civil war the north led by factions from Leninabad (today's Khujand), which were competing yet also allied with eastern Khatlon (led by factions from Kulyab), fought against the Islamists with strongholds in Rasht in central Tajikistan, Gorno-Badakhshan in the south-east and Qurghonteppa (western Khatlon) in the south. Simultaneously Gorno-Badakhshan, which had been an Autonomous Oblast' (termed GBAO) in Soviet-era Tajikistan, fought for

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<sup>2</sup> John Heathershaw and Edmund Herzig, "Introduction: The Sources of Statehood in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 1 (April 2011): 5–19; see also Mohammad-Reza Djalili, Frédéric Grare, and Shirin Akiner, eds., *Tajikistan: The Trials of Independence* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> The ban on the Islamist party was introduced in 1993 and lifted again in 1999. In the March 2015 parliamentary elections, the Islamic Renaissance Party failed to pass the 5 percent vote barrier. Partial results had predicted that the party would win 7.7 percent of the votes, which would have made it the second-largest party. OSCE observers reported that the elections did not meet democratic standards. Qishloq Ovozi, "A Pyrrhic Victory In Tajik Parliamentary Elections," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 5, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-islam-elections-parliament-history/26883637.html>. For official information on the outlawing of the IRPT, see "Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan is declared extremist terrorist organization, and its activities are prohibited," *Khovar*, September 30, 2015, <http://www.khovar.tj/eng/content/islamic-renaissance-party-tajikistan-declared-extremist-terrorist-organization-and-its>.

more self-determination. A further feature of the anatomy of the initially fractured Tajikistani geobody is that its borders are not congruent with the idea of a bounded geographic identity. Like elsewhere in post-Soviet Central Asia, the borders of the state are fused with ethnic connections intertwined with family networks and economic activity. In terms of population, the greatest fusion is with Afghanistan: the Panj River leaves more ethnic Tajiks on the Afghan side (7–8 million in the north-eastern regions) than within the Republic of Tajikistan (80 percent of a total population of 7.5 million).<sup>4</sup> Even though Afghan and Tajik people have been separated since 1895, when the borderline was demarcated on the basis of the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1872, Tajiks living on either side of the Panj River have maintained a bond of kinship and “brotherhood.” During the years of heavy fighting in the civil war (1992–1995), groups from Afghanistan supported the Tajik Islamic opposition, and Tajikistan’s territory provided shelter for the Northern Alliance fighting against the Taliban between 1996 and 2001. Following this Tajikistan became a part of the logistics network set up in the region for the ISAF, and the Dushanbe airport was used by mainly the French military contingent.

Simultaneously the state border with Afghanistan is Tajikistan’s only border lacking controversy over the allocation of territory. The border between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan is still largely mined and reveals the deep hostilities that surfaced after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The border to Kyrgyzstan is fraught with inter-communal conflict that is intertwined with land issues; and pressure from the Chinese government to buy land from eastern Tajikistan has proved too great for Dushanbe to resist. However, even if the relations between Dushanbe and Kabul are unproblematic in comparison with these other neighbors (and a possible return to power by the Taliban in Kabul is unlikely to change the situation much), the threat that developments in Afghanistan will pull Tajikistan deep into conflict is real because instability in Afghanistan reinforces the tensions that in Tajikistan have remained below the surface of the unifying projects of the state after 1997. In recent years (that is, during a time which coincides with the preparation of the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO-led troops from Afghanistan),

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<sup>4</sup> Afghanistan’s population of 30 million (in 2012) is 42 percent Pashtun, 27 percent Tajik, 9 percent Hazara, 9 percent Uzbek, 4 percent Aimak, 3 percent Turkmen, 2 percent Baloch; the remaining 4 percent are made up of smaller groups. “Tajiks” in Tajikistan includes Pamiri-language speakers; in the USSR before 1937 such speakers had been registered as nationalities separate from Tajiks.

Tajikistan has experienced several incidents of violent insurgency which, even when occurring deep within Tajikistani territory, have arisen through transborder connections and caused tension with neighboring states. All this means that the government in Tajikistan is already greatly burdened with problems resulting from fragmented power even while being expected by the international community to show that the Tajikistani state is “fit” to ward off security threats seen to be shared by other regional states and external powers.

The border to Afghanistan is heavily defended through the security guarantees given by Russia and the CSTO, and also the U.S. and China provide technical and material support in strengthening this border. The paradox of this international security cooperation and assistance is that whilst it strengthens external defense it also risks contributing to the increase of internal tensions in an already divided country. International cooperation for the security of borders is an authoritative statement about the existence of threats and can be used to support the legitimacy of measures that risk reproducing the conflicts left by the civil war inside the country. This situation is illustrated by the fact that the dissolution of the IRPT in early September 2015 coincided with armed attacks in the capital and in its vicinity, leaving at least 45 people (including 13 soldiers) dead, many wounded and some 139 detained in an anti-terrorist operation. General Abdukhalim Nazarzoda, a former deputy defense minister, and a group of his supporters were killed in an armed operation carried out by units of the Ministry of the Interior in the Romit Gorge some 150 kilometers from Dushanbe. This took place a few days after the occurrence of violent incidents that included weapons seizure and attacks on the police; the group was accused for planning a coup in favor of Islamic political forces within the country and charged with treason and terrorism. General Nazarzoda was one of the former UTO leaders who had been incorporated into the fragile power-sharing system but who ultimately came to symbolize its failure due to internal rivalries and power struggles. Russian commentary marginalized the significance of the events and Russian authorities reconfirmed their support for Tajikistan.<sup>5</sup> In the same month the CSTO held its summit in Dushanbe and Tajikistan hosted the Exercise Regional Cooperation 2015 organized by the U.S. Central Command, and the

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<sup>5</sup> “Armed clashes in Tajikistan entail no destabilization in that country—CSTO Chief,” *TASS*, September 18, 2015, <http://tass.ru/en/world/822247>.

U.S. also announced a delivery of tactical equipment to Tajikistan's police. These were scheduled events, yet the temporal connection made them into signs of support for the regime.<sup>6</sup>

In the section that follows we examine how Tajikistan's initially fragile and forcibly welded political "geobody" takes shape in the signification of the "frontier land" through the government's responses, both verbal and kinetic, to three outbursts of violence which have created security alerts in Tajikistan during the 2010s: the Rasht events of 2010; the violence in Khorog in 2012; and the long-enduring conflict complex in Ferghana which, in 2014, attracted attention within the CSTO because it had started to impact state relations between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The three series of events all connect with different regions and border dynamics in Tajikistan. We then proceed to examine the role that Russia is taking as the guarantor of security in Tajikistan and the policies through which Tajikistan is striving to expand its space for deliberation and bargaining in determining their common interest. As an external border of the CSTO, Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan is a "common border."<sup>7</sup> Tajikistan hosts Russia's largest ground-force base beyond Russia's own borders and is firmly aligned with Russia. The 201<sup>st</sup> Russian Military Base (formerly Soviet 201<sup>st</sup> Motorized Rifle Division) near Dushanbe, with branches in Qurghonteppa and Kulyab in the south and with some 7,500 military troops (and announced plans to increase the number to 9,000), is emphasized in Moscow to be Russia's "outpost" on the southern CIS borders.<sup>8</sup> Following an examination of these issues, we discuss how the Tajikistani leadership seeks to benefit from the increased international interest that has propelled the states in Central Asia to the center of international efforts to foster economic and social development in and around Afghani-

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<sup>6</sup> "Exercise Regional Cooperation has Nothing to do with Recent Security Operation Conducted in Tajikista [sic]," *ASIA-Plus*, Dushanbe, September 23, 2015, <http://news.tj/en/news/exercise-regional-cooperation-has-nothing-do-recent-security-operation-conducted-tajikista>.

<sup>7</sup> Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Tajikistan, "Interv'iu Posla Rossii v Tadzshikistane I.S. Liakina-Frolova 'Narodnoi gazete,'" accessed October 12, 2015, <http://www.rusemb.tj/ru/index/index/pageId/535>; "Prognozy po Afganistanu vse bolee pessimistichny," (Interview of Ambassador I.S. Liakin-Frolov), *Kommersant*, December 10, 2013, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2364685>.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Interv'iu stats-sekretaria – zamestitelia Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii G.B. Karasina gazete 'Kommersant'," 10 Sentiabria 2013 goda," September 10, 2013, [http://www.mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp\\_4.nsf/arh/0E159670A3714F2344257BE200225B0B?OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/0E159670A3714F2344257BE200225B0B?OpenDocument).

stan. We conclude with a summary of the patterns of policies which shape Tajikistan in its uncertain situation.

## **Tajikistan’s “Problematic Regions”: Recent Violent Encounters and Security Alerts**

*Rasht, August–September 2010*

On August 23, 2010, a group of twenty-five prisoners in Jail No. 1 of Dushanbe City escaped from the prison, killing several security guards, and scattering throughout the country. The escapees included not only criminals but also political prisoners. The Tajik government sent troops under the Ministry of Defense to search for the fugitives in all the regions of the country. On September 19, 2010, the motorcade of the Ministry of Defense, which had been sent to the Rasht region to locate fugitives, was attacked by an armed group. According to official data, 28 people died in a shootout; the number given by non-official sources was about 40. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) claimed responsibility for the attack. In a video the IMU announced its demand that the government was to abandon its current domestic and foreign policies.<sup>9</sup> The IMU has systematically organized armed attacks aimed at establishing the rule of an Islamic state in Central Asia. According to the government’s version of events, the aim of the attack was to impede the law enforcement agencies from performing the tasks by which they represent the authority of the present regime and to gain control over the eastern part of Tajikistan.

The Tajik government announced that the leaders of the group behind the armed attack in Rasht were well-known Tajik warlords from the civil war—Mullo Abdullo (Abdullo Rahimov), Ali Bedaki (Alovuddin Davlatov) and Mirzokhuja Akhmadov. According to official sources, this group was attacking motorcades with the support of international terrorist networks. Several dead bodies of ethnically non-Tajik insurgents were brought forward as evidence. The Tajik government reacted “symmetrically”—with a determined use of military force—to what it unequivocally described as a terrorist

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<sup>9</sup> Maksim Kulinov, “Ubiitsy tadhikskikh voennykh obeshchaiut novye terakty,” *Segodnia*, September 24, 2010, <http://www.segodnia.ru/content/13998>.

attack. In January 2011 government sources released the news that Ali Bedaki had been killed during military action. However, at the same time a video was posted on the internet that showed the detained Ali Bedaki being interrogated by government authorities. A short while later the government made an official announcement that the detainee in the video was not the real Ali Bedaki. Further, Tajikistan's most infamous terrorist, Mullo Abdullo, was killed during a military operation in Rasht in April 2011. This field commander in the civil war, who had rejected the 1997 Peace Accords and remained mainly on the Afghan side of the border ever since then, was rumored to have been establishing a terrorist camp in Rasht. Only Mirzohuja Akhmadov was granted amnesty during the military action for his loyalty and support of the government troops.

From the very beginning of the civil war onward the Rasht region had been the cradle of Tajikistan's Islamic opposition. By its heavy-handed military response to the attack in the gorge the Tajik government demonstrated that it had complete control over the country's territory. The result of these actions was the establishment of a power vertical which subordinated the Rasht region to Dushanbe's control. Through its response the government also made clear its uncompromising attitude towards anybody wishing to mobilize political forces for regime change. This message was sent not only to the local inhabitants; the Tajik authorities repeatedly made statements that they were aware of who had been supporting Tajikistan's domestic terrorists. This reference to outside forces was easily deciphered due to the fact that the Tajik radical Islamic opposition from Rasht had the reputation of being deeply connected with militant insurgent networks such as the IMU and the Taliban. The group attacking the motorcade was reported to be a combination of Tajik, Uzbek, Afghan and Arab radical Islamists. Following the government's military action in Rasht, region-wide insurgent organizations lost one of their strongholds in Central Asia. In addition to this, the Dushanbe government had now also accomplished the elimination of various key figures of the militant opposition of the civil war era. Since the civil war, Tajikistan has lived with the shadowy figures of the former "warlords." Some of these have physically returned to Tajikistan, whilst some repeatedly return to people's minds; yet already the rumors and stories of these nebulous figures of the former warlords of the civil war have had a mobilizing—and dividing—effect on the population, especially in rural areas.



It is reasonable to assume that the insurgents did indeed have connections with the Taliban and the IMU; the latter of these had already shown its presence in Afghanistan a decade earlier and were known to operate from the border zone between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Whether it was the IMU that was actually behind the attack is a different question; yet to assume this is to legitimize the use of force in the state's response. Credibility is stretched when the logical truth that an ethnic Uzbek or Afghan is not Tajik is suggested to further demonstrate that there are "foreigners" inside Tajikistan's borders who are participating in terrorist activities. The information that is available does not reveal from which side of the legal state border the non-Tajik insurgents came. Such facts are difficult to establish in a multi-ethnic region where family bonds extend beyond borders, and it is hardly credible that the official information on the origin of the insurgents could be based on identity papers carried by the insurgents. Interpretations driven by ideas and conventional concepts (the state confined by its borders, nationals vs. non-nationals) are useful in broadening the frame of legitimate action and make it possible to perform legal action in terms of one law rather than another. Although the evidence is not clear in multiethnic Tajikistan, where Uzbek and Afghan ethnic faces are encountered every day, the features argued to demonstrate the presence of "foreign" elements make it possible to frame the events as terrorism steered from abroad. Such interpretations also contribute to an ethno-nationalist project of state-building by constructing a distinctly "national" project of security.

Another question crucial for the meaning of the event is whether the militant insurgents included ethnic Arabs and whether the event, on this basis, can be called "international terrorism" in a wider sense rather than merely regional connections? The evidence provided by official information sources consisted in photographs of bodies, which are data easily manipulated by modern techniques. Again, we cannot know how facts were used to support the argument by which the global war on terror is used to legitimize action eliminating figures (both corporeal and mythical) that have remained from the civil war and that are perceived as acute threats today. The horizon of interpretation we need to introduce in order to make sense of the events and the government's responses that they elicit hinges on the specific future envisioned by decision-makers in Dushanbe. It was important for the government to gain control of the Rasht region before it could become a node in international militant insurgent networks. This is a real threat if and when the Tali-

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ban intensify their fight, even if their own goals remain focused on Afghanistan. In the stress moment over the uncertainty of the future of Afghanistan, the government in Dushanbe is under pressure to show that it is capable of controlling its own territory and of fulfilling the tasks expected of an independent state.

### *The Pamir, July 2012*

In 2011 Tajikistan's parliament acquiesced to China's territorial claims and allowed 5.5 percent of Tajikistani territory in the mountainous Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast' to be ceded to China. The fact that this raised civil protests nowhere else other than in this region itself tells about the political isolation of this ethnically non-Tajik part of Tajikistan from the rest of the country. While Dushanbe was content in having been able to reduce China's demands by fifty percent, within GBAO the deal re-awakened civil war-era arguments about the need for the devolution of the central state.<sup>10</sup> The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (Pamir) has never been effectively included into the judicial system of the republic since Tajikistan became independent. The institutions representing the central power—the Court of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of the Republic of Tajikistan and the Prosecutor's Office of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of the Republic of Tajikistan—have little legitimacy in the eyes of the local people and it is local leaders who hold authority in judicial matters. During the Soviet decades this ethnically and geographically distinct region was an external border of the USSR directly linked to Moscow as a special military district which residents from elsewhere in Tajikistan could not enter without a special permit. But although the entire GBAO was a border region towards China, the far-western parts of China were still habitually closer to the population along the ethnically mixed border than were Dushanbe, Tashkent or Moscow; these capitals were distant not only logistically and geographically but also because of Soviet state practices.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Tajikistan cedes land to China," *BBC*, January 13, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12180567>.

<sup>11</sup> Steven Parham, "'Rightful' versus 'Real' Homelands: Changing Concepts of Kyrgyz Boundaries and Belonging on the China-Kyrgyzstan Frontier," *Asian Ethnicity* 15, no. 3 (July 2014): 265–85.

In July 2012 conflict culminated in a violent encounter between government troops and local inhabitants and resulted in a large number of casualties. This was preceded by a series of incidents, among them occasions on which prosecutors and other representatives of the republic's juridical system as well as members of the police staff had been physically abused by local leaders. The murder of General Abdullo Nazarov, the head of the Pamiri branch of the Committee of National Security, on July 21, 2012, in the vicinity of Khorog was the event which triggered Dushanbe's response. The official authorities announced that the General had been killed by order of Tolibek Ayombekov, a local criminal leader accused of drug trafficking and the smuggling of tobacco and gemstones. Ayombekov had a background of being a "warlord" in the civil war and, until recently, he was deputy chief of the border unit in the Ishkashim district.<sup>12</sup> His person illustrates how, at the conclusion of the civil war, the militia of the opposition forces laid down their arms and became a part of the state, contesting "their share of the rents of statehood."<sup>13</sup>

When the events in Khorog were officially reported, their course at first seemed relatively clear: the central government had shown its determination to punish the General's murderers. The population of Khorog, the region and the entire country could sigh in relief because the government troops and the armed Pamir groups had agreed on a truce and thereby suspended the military operation with its use of air, artillery and special units of the Ministry of Interior Affairs and the Committee of National Security. Imam Aga Khan had once again demonstrated his skill at successfully concluding a peace-making mission: Ayombekov, who initially argued that the operation was a pretext for increasing the grip of central power over the region, himself emphasized that his group surrendered their weapons because Imam Aga Khan had asked them to do so and to cease fighting against the government.<sup>14</sup> However, the situation at the conclusion of the military action was far more contradictory.

The government of Tajikistan had sent around 800 troops (or more than 1000, according to some media sources) to Khorog, where they were faced

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<sup>12</sup> Statement of the General Prosecutor's office of the Republic of Tajikistan, "Za chto ubili generala Nazarova?," *Avesta.tj*, July 28, 2012, <http://www.avesta.tj/government/13360-zachto-ubili-generalanazarova.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Jesse Driscoll quoted in Heathershaw and Herzig, "The Sources of Statehood," 11.

<sup>14</sup> "Interv'iu Toliba Aiombekova pered sdachei," InoZpress Press Digest (source: *Radio Svo-boda*), August 15, 2012, <http://inozpress.kg/news/view/id/36829>.

with fierce armed resistance by a group of local leaders whom the government termed “militants.” The active stage of the military action took place on July 24, 2012. According to official data, 30 people from a militant criminal group and 12 members of the law enforcement bodies of the Republic of Tajikistan died while a further 23 people were injured. According to a number of other (including Russian) media sources about 200 people died, more than half of whom were unarmed, ordinary citizens.<sup>15</sup> As opposed to the Rasht events, in which the majority of the population supported the government and were able to accept the harsh military measures, the events in the Pamirs divided public opinion throughout the country. In Rasht militant insurgents, allegedly affiliated with radical international jihadist groups, had fought against the secular regime. In Khorog, the opposition consisted of local inhabitants, both unarmed people and armed groups, and their action was aimed at increasing the autonomy of regional policies and businesses. The government defined the events in Rasht as a terrorist attack, whereas the response to the situation in the Pamirs was described as a struggle against criminal groups. Bringing the army into the region with armored personnel carriers and helicopters—an operation which necessitated closing the Khorog-Dushanbe highway and switching off internet servers—made the action appear as a massive demonstration of the state’s power in the classical sense of its monopoly over the means of violence. Whether this showing of the presence of the state’s power was intended to deter the pursuit of regional autonomy from governance structures or whether it was designed to crush illegal local enterprise is difficult to ascertain; in all likelihood, both reasons pertain.

The Pamiri population took an active part in the information war against the government’s military action. Local residents had access to the mass media and international organizations, and they were able to organize a popular campaign against the government’s military action through their social networks. The demonstrations organized by the Pamiri people near Tajik embassies in various countries showed that the government’s regular measure—to close down Tajik and Russian internet providers—was not effective due to the wider international connections of the Pamir population. Pamiri representatives evaluated the government’s actions as an ethnicity-based repres-

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<sup>15</sup> “Okolo 200 chelovek pogibli v khode spetsoperatsii v Tadjzhikistane - SMI,” *RIA Novosti*, July 24, 2012, <http://ria.ru/world/20120724/708131588.html>.

sion of Badakhshan's inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> Both internal and international pressure forced the Tajik government to start negotiating an agreement with local leaders. While the government's measures in Rasht were able to benefit from the international condemnation of terrorism, in Khorog international opinion constrained action. The Tajik government also needed to take into account that a prolonged conflict would affect the economic situation. The Pamir region is one of the main gateways for the transit of goods between Tajikistan and China even if in recent years it has been losing its pre-eminence to the more accessible routes through southern Kyrgyzstan.

Very little was achieved from the government's point of view. The conflict was merely brought to a standstill but, unlike in Rasht, the central government did not continue its efforts to establish full authority over the Pamir territory. The majority of local leaders who had participated in the violent outburst remained free. No guarantees were established to prevent the conflict from reigniting, and armed clashes relating to protests prompted by the detention of locals again flared up in December, 2013 as well as in May, 2014. In summer 2012 the need to maintain a peaceful political climate before the upcoming presidential elections of November 2013 (in which the incumbent president was re-elected) was one of the reasons requiring the cessation of the conflict before it threatened to proliferate. The decision-makers in Dushanbe also had to consider the sensitivity of the political situation in Badakhshan, where local leaders have close connections with Afghan Badakhshani across the border; the latter would likely support their "brothers" were a conflict to flare up between the Pamir region and Tajikistan's central government. In light of the draw-down of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan, such cross-border bonds are likely to be further strengthened. There were also rumors—reinforced from government-related sources one year later, in July 2013—that a new country, "Greater Badakhshan" (which would combine the two regions straddling the border) is being supported by countries external to the region.<sup>17</sup> If "Greater Badakhshan" was in fact believed to be on the "New Great Game" chessboard in order to better control Afghanistan after the Western military withdraws, Dushanbe's show of force

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<sup>16</sup> In Tajikistani state practices, the Pamiri are not considered as a separate ethnic group but instead as a sub-group of the Tajik people who speak a different dialect and adhere to the Ismaili branch of Islam.

<sup>17</sup> "Russia and China will help prevent creation of 'Great [sic] Badakhshan,' says Tajik Expert," *ASIA-Plus*, July 12, 2013, <http://news.tj/en/news/russia-and-china-will-help-prevent-creation-great-badakhshan-says-tajik-expert>.

was also a message sent to the alleged plotters. However, for the domestic audience the lack of transparency about the purpose and the goals of the operation were striking. All the same it became clear that while the uncertainty over the developments in Afghanistan was an important reason for the Tajikistani government to implement its measures in Rasht, in Khorog and the Pamir region a massive use of force would generate a backlash and, ultimately, prove to be counterproductive. Alongside these local and regional dynamics, a more general, country-wide political polarization also impacts the region. The region is not spared from the crackdown on Islamist politicians that is taking place throughout the country and which affects not only radical wings but also the more moderate Islam of the IRPT, that is, of the political force which, at the conclusion of the civil war, was meant to prevent political polarization. Because the international war on terrorism has made it commonly acceptable to claim that phenomena described as political and religious “extremism” predict terrorist acts and, consequently, in legal codes and in other policies and action can be legitimately brought under the concept of the “threat of terrorism,” violent acts or their preparation are not needed as evidence of the threat situations which can legally invoke the government’s response, including the use of armed security units. The alleged enemy is not limited to the militant insurgency which challenges the state’s authority but also includes the rather more diffuse ideological enemies, in which case the evidence of subversive activity can be as arbitrary as the existence of family relations and religious habits. This practice of political polarization, which has been present and on the increase ever since the first years following the implementation of the peace settlement, diminishes the space for a middle ground in politics and, in this way, strengthens authoritarianism. The uncertainty over Afghanistan has become a further push towards such development.

Russia did not directly involve itself in the conflict events in Rasht and the Pamirs but it did support Tajikistan’s authorities through the regional institutions within the frame of the CIS and, especially, by providing military and technical assistance and training for the Tajik enforcement bodies through the CSTO. The Russian president and foreign ministry, like also the state leaders in Tajikistan’s Central Asian neighbors, expressed their concern over the need to restore stability and public order in the problem regions yet

refrained from any active involvement in the conflicts.<sup>18</sup> Only the president of Belarus, Alexandr Lukashenko, presented a demand that the CSTO should react to the events in the Pamirs in order not to undermine its own goals as a serious organization. In his response to this demand, Nikolai Bordiuzha, the general secretary of the CSTO, underlined that the situation in Tajikistan was that country's internal affair and that its authorities were capable of solving the difficulties in question on their own. Lukashenko's intervention, just like Bordiuzha's more technically worded emphasis on the need to "monitor" the situation, shows that the CSTO continues to closely observe the situation in Tajikistan and that there are pressures to develop support which would decrease the need to become directly involved in a member state's internal conflicts.<sup>19</sup> In the Moscow media a few months later, Bordiuzha assured that the use of servicemen at the Russian base in Tajikistan in conflicts such as those in Khorog was categorically "ruled out" because the bilateral agreements between the two countries dealt with Russia's assistance only in relation to external threats.<sup>20</sup> Because non-interference applies to "internal" conflicts, it is also in Russia's interest that these conflicts can be internally contained and that its support, which continues to cleave the political landscape in the country, remains in the background.

### *Sugd, Spring 2014*

The third region in which recent violent outbursts with cross-border implications have taken place is Sugd, Tajikistan's part of the Ferghana Valley. Ever since the final years of the Soviet Union, the Ferghana Valley has been a high-risk area for violent social and interethnic conflict. Violent outbursts in recent years have arisen mostly from conflicts over development resources—in particular over land, water and road construction. Because the valley is today a habitual space divided between three states (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan

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<sup>18</sup> "IDUt k 'OKNU'?", *Novaia Gazeta*, October 21, 2010, <http://www.novgaz.com/index.php/2-news/529-идут-к-окну>.

<sup>19</sup> Anna Analbaeva, "Pora vmeshat'sia," *Vzgliad*, July 31, 2012, <http://www.vz.ru/politics/2012/7/31/591112.html>.

<sup>20</sup> "Russian troops will not be used for suppressing protests in Tajikistan, says CSTO Secretary General," *ASIA-Plus*, November 21, 2012 (the article makes reference to *RIA Novosti* and Bordiuzha's interview in *Moscow News*), <http://news.tj/en/news/russian-troops-will-not-be-used-suppressing-protests-tajikistan-says-csto-secretary-general>.

and Kyrgyzstan), the eruption of violence in one part of the region affects another part and, like this, becomes an issue which involves the territories of various states. The large number of enclaves and the absence of delimited and demarcated borders increase the complexity of communal and ethnic relations. The fertile valley, where land is scarce due to dense population and where one ethnic group so often lives surrounded by another, is commonly perceived as an ethno-political powder-keg. Tensions escalate when violent incidents in one country not only draw attention in the neighboring country but also prompt it to mobilize its security forces to prevent the disorder from spreading, thereby unleashing mutual accusations over the operation of foreign agencies and terrorist groups in their respective territories. The role of the Ferghana Valley as one of the main routes (“the North corridor”) for narcotics from Afghanistan and its reputation, brought about in the late 1990s, for being a “hub” of Islamic activities, increase the complexity of conflict at the inter-state level.

Ethnically polarized conflicts between the Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek populations have occurred frequently over the past three years in the Kyrgyzstani Batken and Osh regions.<sup>21</sup> On January 11, 2014, a border skirmish over road construction resulted in violent conflict that included hostage-taking amongst the Tajik and Kyrgyz populations in the enclaves in the undemarcated border zone between the two countries.<sup>22</sup> During May 7–8, about 60 people on both sides were reported to have been injured in interethnic clashes which resulted in the blockage of the Isfara-Vorukh road by the Kyrgyz and the Batken-Isfara road by the Tajiks; the former road runs through a Kyrgyz village, and the latter through a Tajik village. Because these territories are deeply intertwined violence has erupted on the Kyrgyz as well as the Tajik (and Uzbek) sides, even if media attention has focused on Kyrgyzstan in particular.<sup>23</sup> The neighboring states have complained that Kyrgyzstan’s social

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<sup>21</sup> “Vorukh vyshel iz blokady,” *Radio Ozodi*, April 28, 2013, <http://rus.ozodi.org/content/tensions-in-vorukh-ended/24970574.html>; Malika Sharif, “Kak izmenilis’ otnosheniia mezhdru kirgizami i uzbekami posle konflikta,” *Deutsche Welle online*, July 22, 2010, <http://dw.com/p/ORdt>.

<sup>22</sup> “Na kirgizsko-tadzhikskoi granitse proizoshla perestrelka mezhdru pogranchnikami, est’ ranenye,” *REGNUM*, January 11, 2014, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/17533343.html#ixzz2s4fyQ1Ta>.

<sup>23</sup> “Rasstrel demonstrantov v Andizhane – prestuplenie, ne imeiushchee istoricheskoi davnosti,” *Jarayon.com*, May 23, 2015, <http://jarayon.com/ru/index.php/2012-04-03-17-13-06/>



and ethnic tensions and political conflict, as well as Bishkek's changing regimes, have resulted in the inability of the country's central authorities to properly govern the difficult territory in the south of Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan, for its part, has blamed local Tajiks for "hooliganism," and initiatives were formulated that ranged from closing the border crossing points to increasing the fees for transit, although these were only partly implemented. Alexander Knyazev, a Russian analyst, expressed the opinion that "the Kyrgyz officials are looking for an external enemy to mobilize the population; and Tajikistan, in comparison with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, with which the Kyrgyz Republic also has border tensions, is the least dangerous country."<sup>24</sup> Both countries started constructing longer road routes that bypass the villages populated by the titular ethnic group of the neighboring country.

However, the fact that closing the border would have negative consequences for the economies of both countries ultimately pushed the two governments to try to resolve the conflict by diplomatic means. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have had a joint border commission since 2002 and have been able to define 50–60 percent of their almost one-thousand kilometer-long mutual borderline. Although the CSTO, of which both countries are members, refrained from openly intervening in the conflicts that erupted in spring 2014, its assistance was clear from the results of the visit of the organization's Secretary General, Nikolai Bordiuzha, to Dushanbe and Bishkek in February 2014: after this meeting Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan continued their negotiations without further outbursts of violence.<sup>25</sup> Earlier, in late spring 2010, the social upheaval and interethnic violence between Uzbek and Kyrgyz populations in south-western Kyrgyzstan and the city of Osh had demonstrated how such conflicts could create dissent within the organization and negatively affect its reputation. In spring 2015, at a time when Tajikistan and

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item/347-rasstrel-demonstrantov-v-andizhane-prestuplenie-ne-imeyushchee-istoricheskoy-davnosti; "Tadzhiksko-kirgizskii konflikt: Dolgoe molchanie Tadzhikistana bylo obosnovano," *Pressa.tj*, January 16, 2015, <http://rus.pressa.tj/news/tadzhiksko-kirgizskiy-konflikt-dolgoe-molchanie-tadzhikistana-bylo-obosnovano>.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Knyazev interviewed in Viktoriia Panfilova, "Kirgizy s tadzhikami deliat nebo," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, January 29, 2014, [http://www.ng.ru/cis/2014-01-29/7\\_kirgizia.html](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2014-01-29/7_kirgizia.html).

<sup>25</sup> "ODKB sledit za protsessom uregulirovaniia pograničnogo konflikta i predlaetaet konsul'tativnuiu pomoshch'," *KGinform*, January 16, 2014, as cited in CSTO "Informatsionnyi Biulleten' Sekretariata ODKB," January 17, 2014, [http://www.odkb-csto.org/obzor-pressy/detail.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=3162](http://www.odkb-csto.org/obzor-pressy/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=3162); Denis Kozhemiakin, "Bordiuzha kak bordiur mezhdru kirgizami i tadzhikami," *Soiuz nezavisimyykh zhurnalistov Tsentral'noi Azii*, February 15, 2014, <http://ca-snj.com/bordiyuzha-kak-bordiyur-mezhdru-kirgizami-i-tadzhikami>.

Kyrgyzstan were already in diplomatic negotiations to solve the problems of communal violence in Ferghana, they also confirmed their willingness to cooperate in their search for solutions to these conflicts within the frame of the CIS.

Both the tightened security situation in the region as well as the benefits that are expected to accrue from mutual economic cooperation have brought Dushanbe and Bishkek together in trying to find solutions to communal violence in the Ferghana Valley. However, without Uzbekistan's participation the bilateral efforts to control the flow of drugs and militant insurgency cannot be effective.<sup>26</sup> In the Alay mountain ranges the borders of the three states converge in rough terrain that shelters illegal trade routes as well as insurgent groups linked with IMU and Hizb ut-Tahrir. If the routes in Ferghana were closed they could be redirected through Pamir areas, and new air routes using small planes across the largely mined land border of Uzbekistan could also be opened. The hostilities between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which have to do with historical conflicts and present-day economic and energy relations, have created obstacles to the mutual cooperation of the two countries throughout the years of their independence. Tajikistan's tightened policies towards the political forces of Islam have an appeasing effect on relations with Uzbekistan because Dushanbe's moderate policies were not initially in line with Tashkent's expectations. Throughout the three countries' years of independence Uzbekistan's suppression of radical Islam has pushed these forces across its borders. More recently this has meant that the IMU has connected with especially the activity of Jamaat Ansarullah ("Allah Associates Society") in the north of Tajikistan—a group that has been vocal in condemning the Russian military presence in Tajikistan.<sup>27</sup> Closing the front of radical Islam in the intersection of the three countries requires Uzbekistan's cooperation; and burying the peace deal by banning the IRPT is conducive towards this end.

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<sup>26</sup> The borderline between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan is 1,378 km, of which 337 km have been agreed upon (as of June 2014); the rest remains disputed and under negotiation.

<sup>27</sup> Igor Rotar, "Moscow and Dushanbe Strengthen Their Military Alliance," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 10, no. 184 (October 16, 2013), [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=41493&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=685&no\\_cache=1#.VqNjKY9OJy0](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41493&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=685&no_cache=1#.VqNjKY9OJy0).

## Negotiating Frontier Security with Russia

In the military sense Russia's role in Tajikistan today does not fundamentally differ from the role it played there during the civil war when it sent forces to secure the Dushanbe airport and the Afghan border, nominally in the CIS frame and under the Tashkent treaty (CST). However, while this backing at that time was used to weld together a country from the pieces of the former Soviet republic, today its military presence provides external backing to the burial of the process envisioned in the Peace Accords. From the point of view of both Russia and Tajikistan, the dilemma is that while insecurity in the wider region seems to necessitate tightening the belt of security vis-a-vis not only the Taliban but also the Islamic State (IS) which provides support and intermingles with regional insurgency, this belt also threatens to break up Tajikistan from the inside and to deepen the conflict north of the Panj and Amu Darya rivers.

Russia's two-track approach in security cooperation, which includes multilateral cooperation in the CSTO and cooperation based on bilateral agreements, provides it with a decisive role in most issues while at the same time allowing it to use the formal legitimacy of the multilateral frame of cooperation. Such complementarity is practical in the situation that pertains here, where the organization's collective security (that is, aggression against one is considered as aggression against all) applies at the Afghan border, but the actual threat from the south as well as from other directions appears in other forms. Terrorism, religious extremism and narcotraffic are the actual issues on the cooperation agenda between Russia and Tajikistan. On the eve of 2015, Russia's special representative to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, warned that up to five thousand "Islamists" were concentrated in northern Afghanistan and that at least three camps were each training some fifty militants every two months with recruits from the Central Asian countries.<sup>28</sup> While the Taliban is growing with these non-Pashtun groups, this ebbing towards Afghanistan threatens to turn into a returning flood, thereby creating a new "Afghan front" for Russia and leading to the crumbling of the outer edge of its power that had been set by the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. This

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<sup>28</sup> "Russian Ambassador Warns of Afghan Problems Spilling across Border," *ASIA-Plus*, Dushanbe, December 30, 2014, <http://news.tj/en/news/russian-ambassador-warns-afghan-problems-spilling-across-border>. Kabulov's original interview was given to *Interfax*.

means that Tajikistan's role is more than one of being merely a control zone for violent insurgency and illegal economic transactions: it is also a zone of containment for ideological influence.

Russia has a long historical tradition of flexible outer borders that intertwine geopolitics and ideology, and the habitual space shared by Tajiks inside Afghanistan has played a significant role in such frontier dynamics in Central Asia. Historians have argued that the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, which was established in December 1929 to replace the Tajik ASSR within the Uzbek SSR, was actually formed to reflect and politically utilize the closely bonded relations between Tajiks on both sides of the bordering river.<sup>29</sup> By providing the Tajik population with the privilege of having their own titular republic within the USSR, Moscow's decision-makers wished to attract the "new Afghanistan" and bring it under Soviet influence. Such an opportunity existed when, in early 1929, ethnic Tajiks came to power in Afghanistan as a people who represented the lower stratum of Afghan society and, thus, were able to share in the ideology of the Soviet state. However, events soon took another course: Pashtun tribes and Great Britain supported Muhammad Nadir-shah, who captured Kabul in October 1929 and was declared king.

Another opportunity to connect Afghanistan to the Soviet sphere came half a century later, in 1978, with the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. A coup known as the Saur Revolution brought to power the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, which, however, soon succumbed to ideological strife between its radical and moderate wings. In December 1979 the Soviet Union intervened to support the moderates led by Babrak Karmal and, much too late in 1986, to launch a policy of national reconciliation under the leadership of Muhammad Najibullah. During the decade-long Soviet quagmire, which ended with the withdrawal of Soviet troops in the months from May 1988 to February 1989, ethnic Tajiks acted as advisers and interpreters and in this way played a bridging role between Afghan authorities and Soviet power. Because the Russians were unable to understand Dari (the variety of the Persian language spoken in Afghanistan), they invited Tajiks to implement Soviet policies.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A. D. Bogaturov, *Sistemnaia istoriia mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Kul'turnaia Revoliutsiia, 2007), 210.

<sup>30</sup> The communist leaders were all Pashtun, but in Afghanistan and Tajikistan Babrak Karmal was also recognized as a nephew of the ethnic Tajik Habibulloh (Bachai Sako) from his

Even after the Soviet troops had pulled back from Afghanistan to the Tajik border in early 1989, and the Panj and Amu Darya rivers had, for the first time in their history, become a militarily sealed borderline, Moscow still considered the northern part of Afghanistan—inhabited as it was by ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks—very much as its external borderland. There were still hopes that northern Afghanistan could be linked with Soviet Central Asia in energy networks and other economic cooperation, and that the Hindu Kush mountain range in the east could in this way be included in a line of defense against the political unrest and clan turmoil to the south. However, the following years made it clear that the line of containment of radical Islam was much farther to the north, along the banks of the border river.<sup>31</sup> This was a line, thin not only in terms of geo-space but also ethnically and politically, as well as in terms of the law enforcement structures that could be established in order to curtail the trade in opiates and other illegal border crossings. Already during the final years of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan's economic situation had been dire, and its southern regions had been hit by starvation. When the civil war brought a further drastic deterioration in social conditions, the contraband of opiates and gemstones in the Pamir region became a way of survival for large parts of the civilian population. It also became a source of income for those militant Islamist groups who had refused to disarm and chosen to regain their strength on the other side of the southern border.

The civil war led to the withdrawal of the radical opposition and militant insurgency into the Afghan and Pakistani border zones, and the massive ISAF presence held the situation in abeyance. Nevertheless, it was not until 2005–2006 that the Russian border guards left the border to Afghanistan under Tajikistan's control. The return of Russian border guards to the Afghan border has been on and off the bilateral agenda ever since December 2010, when Russia began to apply pressure on Tajikistan over this issue.<sup>32</sup> Russia's

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mother's side. However, Pashtun was his declared ethnicity and, in practice, formed a condition of becoming a general in Afghanistan.

<sup>31</sup> During the 1980s Moscow had sought to initiate national reconciliation in Afghanistan. By autumn 1987 it had become clear that this had failed in regions south of the Hindu Kush. Joseph Newman, Jr., "The Future of Northern Afghanistan," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 7 (July 1988): 729–39.

<sup>32</sup> In 2005 Tajikistan decided against continuing the agreement from 1992, which had tasked Russian troops with controlling the border. The number of Russian border guards amounted to 12,000 (70–80 percent of whom were Tajikistani citizens employed by the Russian border guard corps). The Russians left in 2005–2006 (after having been there ever since the borders of the Uzbek SSR began to be guarded in the 1930s). Some 300 advisers and ex-

expressed concern was over the massive flow of opiates across the border, but Tajikistani authorities were able to deflect this by arguing that this specific problem could not be solved by increasing manpower at the border.<sup>33</sup> Solving this problem, they argued, required international cooperation in several multilateral formats, including the CIS and the SCO. At the CSTO meeting in Sochi in September 2013, President Rakhmon (Rakhmonov with the Slavic names ending used until March 2007) asked for support for the Tajikistani law enforcement bodies in their task of managing the border with Afghanistan, and at the next meeting in Moscow in May 2014, he called to mind that the promises of a CSTO resolution on the provision of military technology had not been fulfilled. A few weeks later the Council of the Heads of State of the CIS reached a decision signed by the CSTO members (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan) on assistance to Tajikistan in regard to the fortification and development of the border area with Afghanistan; its implementation was left to the bilateral relations between Tajikistan and the other signatories.<sup>34</sup> The smaller members of the CSTO have little reason to commit any substantive amounts of their own scarce resources but, within Tajikistan, an increase in the number of partners clearly serves a policy profile that seeks to show Tajikistan's independence from Russia.

After Tajikistan's parliament in October 2013 ratified the agreement that extends the Russian use of the base in Tajikistan until 2042, a series of bilateral agreements have ensured Russia's military presence in the country and, thus, also the possibility to quickly mobilize troops along the border. Russia's direct and permanent presence at the border has little strategic military significance in relation to the bilateral cooperation developed inside the country for tracking illegal border crossings and setting up the collective air force of the CSTO. In December 2014, the leaders of the CSTO member

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perts remained. Their number was later reduced to several tens only. More recently, the number has once again been increased and today also the border agency of the CIS member states focuses on the Afghan border.

<sup>33</sup> See *Introduction*, note 15 in this book. The drug traffic has increased in recent years despite international efforts to curb opiate cultivation in Afghanistan, and the economic situation in Afghanistan leaves little economic and political space for the regime in Kabul to curb the flow. Sergei Balmasov, "Russian Border Guards to Fight Taliban," *Pravda.ru*, December 17, 2010, [http://english.pravda.ru/hotspots/conflicts/17-12-2010/116248-russia\\_tajikistan\\_afghanistan-0/](http://english.pravda.ru/hotspots/conflicts/17-12-2010/116248-russia_tajikistan_afghanistan-0/).

<sup>34</sup> "CIS to Provide Assistance to Tajikistan in Strengthening of Tajik-Afghan Border Protection," *AKIpress*, Bishkek, June 5, 2014, <http://www.akipress.com/news:542655/>.

states agreed upon developing a comprehensive and functionally flexible collective air force which includes military transport and special aviation units of not only the armed forces but also police forces, interior troops and security agencies.<sup>35</sup> The collective force remains effectively under Russian control, and the disparity of capabilities is especially striking in relation to Tajikistan, which possesses but one squadron of small aircraft.

An episode in this development has been the negotiations between Tajikistan and Russia over the use of the Ayni airfield, which is located in the vicinity of Dushanbe and lies just ten minutes away from the Rasht region by air, and which was reopened in autumn 2010 after its modernization with Indian technical and financial support worth \$70 million. The question over the use of Ayni had gone unanswered since summer 2007, when Tajikistan announced that it was not negotiating over the use of the base with India.<sup>36</sup> However, it was not until May 2013 that an announcement was made to the effect that the Ayni airfield would be part of Russia's military base in Tajikistan and, together with the facilities in the south, would be used as the key base for the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Force.<sup>37</sup> Tajikistan used Ayni as a bargaining chip in the bundle of issues concerning the financing of the Rogun hydropower station and the rents that could be gained from the use of the main base as well as Ayni. Although Russia did not signal that it would make any promises in regard to financing the Rogun power station, and although Russia's opinion on compensation was that this would come in form of modernizing Tajikistan's security forces, the negotiations over Ayni and the delay in the ratification of the agreement on extending the Russian base in Tajikistan show Dushanbe's determination in trying to bargain for resources in exchange for Russia's military presence.

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<sup>35</sup> "CSTO Summit Adopts Joint Statement, 19 Resolutions, Two Protocols," *TASS*, Moscow, December 23, 2014, <http://tass.ru/en/world/768706>. The cooperation in the CIS frame in the 1990s already included development of joint air force.

<sup>36</sup> India did not jeopardize its relations with Russia with favorable arms deals because of Ayni. It was left with the smaller field in Farkhor, which it had renovated for some \$10 million.

<sup>37</sup> In October 2014, President Rakhmon met with Nikolai Patrushev, head of Russia's federal security services; the details of the discussion have not been made public. "Russia Concerned Over Tajik-Afghan Border Security," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, November 11, 2014, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/13087-russia-concerned-over-tajik-afghan-border-security.html>.

## High Stakes for Energy Sufficiency and Beyond

The lack of energy is the primary resource problem undermining Tajikistan's eight million inhabitants' support for the government. Coal-burning during cold winters is a health hazard and has even led to deaths, and the repeated cut-offs initiated by Uzbekistan in the flow of energy have seriously harmed the state-owned Tajikistan Aluminum Company (Talco) which, in Turzunzade in the immediate vicinity of the Uzbekistani border, produces more than 60 percent of Tajikistan's export revenue.<sup>38</sup> As a consequence it is crucially important for the Tajikistani government to capture the political moment in regard to developing Afghanistan in order to diversify its economic relations and to participate in large-scale energy projects that could drastically reduce its dependence on Russian investment and energy and, above all, on the energy resources of neighboring Uzbekistan. Throughout the years of independence the conflict-ridden relationship with Uzbekistan—the country through which Tajikistan must transit to Russia and Europe—has created major obstacles to developing its economic capacities. Air traffic between Tashkent and Dushanbe was halted in 1992, and Uzbekistan has on many occasions halted trains transporting vital items for Tajikistan's agriculture and industry. This has become all the more burdensome because the bilateral economic relations in terms of Russian investments in Tajikistan and any structural development of the mutual economic relations have been in sharp decline. At the same time as Eurasian economic integration has been advanced within the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU, also abbreviated as EAEU), Tajikistan has lost the kind of individualized, special relationship it had still had with Moscow in the aftermath of its civil war.<sup>39</sup>

Moscow's failure to fulfill its initial promise to support the modernization of the Soviet-era power plant in Rogun has caused major disappointment in Tajikistan. With a height of 335 meters the Rogun dam was planned to become the tallest dam in the world and to make Tajikistan a major exporter

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<sup>38</sup> In order to avoid such extreme vulnerability, Talco has developed a capacity to use domestic coal instead of Uzbek gas, which causes its own environmental problems.

<sup>39</sup> Russia has not made any major investments in Tajikistan since the Sangtuda hydropower station in 2009. The treaty for the establishment of the EEU was signed on May 29, 2014, by Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, and it became effective on January 1, 2015, following its ratification by the parliaments of those three countries. Armenia signed the agreement on accession in October 2014, and Kyrgyzstan in December 2014.



of electric power. The Russian aluminum giant RUSAL negotiated a bilateral agreement with Tajikistan in 2004 as a trade-off for a nominal one-dollar lease for Russia's military base, yet it withdrew from the deal to avoid conflict arising between Tashkent and Moscow. Uzbekistan, a downstream country and ill-disposed to Tajikistan's entry into the energy market, has been fiercely opposed to the Rogun plan and shown itself willing only to accept a far smaller hydropower station. Although Moscow's "promise" was a deal concluded through an oligarchic company and never resulted in a plan that would also have committed the Russian government, the withdrawal of support left not only Tajikistan's elites but the entire population disillusioned: Russia had signaled very clearly that it would not risk its relations with the larger and economically stronger Uzbekistan by showing solidarity with Tajikistan.<sup>40</sup>

In 2008, Tajikistan founded the Open Joint-Stock Company NBO Rogun and, in 2010, launched a country-wide campaign which obliged every family in this poorest of countries in Central Asia to buy stocks of the \$3–5 billion megaproject which had now become a national symbol and personally associated with the president. In September 2014, after several years of delays due to ongoing environmental impact assessments in the frame of the World Bank, an evaluation came to the conclusion that, subject to design changes and safety measures based on three design options ranging from 1,220 to 1,290m, the dam was the type of high-risk yet potentially highly rewarding hydroelectric power project that the World Bank would accept under the condition that the resettlement of some 42,000 people could be adequately solved. Using the political momentum of developing energy grids benefiting the development of Afghanistan, Tajikistan has been seeking to invite external investment by lobbying hard in the world's capitals and exempting (by way of a presidential decree in February 2014) the Rogun HPP construction owner and contractor from taxes.<sup>41</sup>

A potentially game-changing endeavor for Tajikistan is the CASA-1000 power transmission project—a \$500 million project financed by a group of

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<sup>40</sup> After the U.S. had left the base in Karshi-Khanabad following the Andijon events in 2005, Uzbekistan became ready to rejoin the CSTO.

<sup>41</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Q&A: The Human Fallout from Tajikistan's Dam Project," June 25, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/25qa-human-fallout-tajikistans-dam-project>; "Finalized Assessment Studies for Rogun Project Find It's Possible to Safely Build and Operate Dam," *AKIpress*, Bishkek, September 3, 2014, <http://www.akipress.com/news:546870/>.

global development banks and connecting Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to export electric power.<sup>42</sup> The Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan electricity network is planned to be operational by 2018 and will use the excess of summer energy in Tajikistan made possible by new facilities there. The use of summer energy is envisioned by the Tajikistani leadership to be only the first phase. The ultimate, game-changing prospect for Tajikistan in the CASA-1000 project is that if the Rogun power station construction could be completed in time (current plans aim for 2021–2022), this would massively increase Tajikistan’s capacity to produce electricity for export. The plan to construct Rogun awaits external financing, and in the meantime CASA-1000 represents rather more than just this one project for Tajikistan: it is a base for performing a “quantum leap” that could turn energy-poor Tajikistan into an electric power-exporting country. As the flagship for the “New Silk Roads” approach launched by the U.S., the project has exceptional political weight internationally. However, building the transmission line in the Afghan-Pakistani border zone is a major challenge because of the deeply conflictual political terrain, and this problem can be solved neither in the Inter-Governmental Council set up by the four states nor through the agreements of the Joint Economic Commission of Dushanbe and Islamabad.<sup>43</sup>

Tajikistan did not join the Eurasian Economic Union as readily as did Kyrgyzstan (which joined in December 2014); instead, it has set up six working groups to study the benefits and problems of membership.<sup>44</sup> In a country where 50–70 percent of the active workforce are migrant workers in Russia there is no alternative to joining. Moreover, the EEU is the only frame which exists in the region for comprehensive economic integration, and it can also be expected to offer new possibilities, in particular in the context of the planned integrated energy market.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless the EEU, which brings in

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<sup>42</sup> The main financiers of the \$500 million project are the World Bank, the International Bank for Development, the Islamic Development Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Initially, Russia proposed a \$500 million investment for the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan energy line, but the reimbursement and other conditions were not accepted by these two countries. Contrary to its previous plans, the Asian Development Bank decided in late spring 2013 not to participate due to the security risks in Afghanistan.

<sup>43</sup> Tajikistan and Pakistan have established a Joint Economic Commission and reached agreement on the CASA project at the governmental level.

<sup>44</sup> Saodat Olimova, “Tajikistan’s Prospects of Joining the Eurasian Economic Union,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 165 (March 17, 2015), [http://www.laender-analysen.de/rusland/rad/pdf/Russian\\_Analytical\\_Digest\\_165.pdf](http://www.laender-analysen.de/rusland/rad/pdf/Russian_Analytical_Digest_165.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> The Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (OCAC, established in 1991) never became operative due to mutual distrust, territory claims and other disputes between the Central

Kazakhstan and other member states, does not offer a sufficient frame for a consortium to finance Rogun as long as Russia declines to play any major role. This situation forces Tajikistan to seek investment from elsewhere, including from China, Iran and the Arab states; this, in turn, may remain a long-term prospect should China choose to wait and see how the EEU impacts the region, and should Western states' commitment to financing CASA reduce their interest in contributing to the regionally controversial Rogun project. Additionally, the richer Arab states are unlikely to make significant contributions to a project that angers Uzbekistan, which is a far more important market than Tajikistan due to its energy wealth and population of 28 million.

Because Russia's economic support for Tajikistan has declined, Tajikistan looks for economic resources first and foremost in its relations with China. The fact that Tajikistan is a neighbor of the world's second-largest economy is visible not only in the commodity market but, increasingly, also in major infrastructure projects including energy, industry and the construction business (in particular, building roads and tunnels as well as urban environments). In spite of Uzbekistan's strong opposition and lobbying efforts, China is building a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which is economically more rational than the longer route through Uzbekistan. As this project also shows, Dushanbe is logistically coming closer to China through Kyrgyzstan, which connects the northern Sugd region to trade flows from China. Because Chinese interests are seen to largely follow business and economic rules, cooperation with China is considered to be more promising in terms of long-term stability than is cooperation with Russia, which has the reputation of prioritizing political interests.<sup>46</sup> While relations with Russia are increasingly focused on security, Tajikistan needs to look elsewhere for economic help. In relation to the EEU, it cannot avoid accession (in order to avoid the political and economic consequences of not joining) and is waiting to see what benefits this integration perhaps could bring in the future.

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Asian states. In 2005 it merged with the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), which had (on paper only) preceded the EEU.

<sup>46</sup> Khamrokhon Zarifi, "Tadzhikistan i Kitai: dobrososedstvo, družba i sotrudnichestvo imia mira, stabil'nosti i protsvetaniia," *People's Daily*, April 27, 2010, <http://russian.people.com.cn/31521/6964733.html>.

## **Conclusion: the Problematic Equation of Security**

Tajikistan's government has repeatedly confirmed its determination to fight terrorism, extremism and criminal groups, both through its action and in its announcements. This sends a message to its declared enemies and also signals that Tajikistan is a responsible member of the international community and able to control its own territory; not doing so would leave room for speculation over its status as a "failed state" and raise questions about the need for external intervention (that is, intervention by Russia and the CSTO) in order to secure the southern border. Similarly, the aim to expand the space for independent policy-making and to decrease dependence on Russia induces Tajikistan's leadership to welcome security cooperation with a large number of countries, including the U.S. (in the context of its regional cooperation and bilateral assistance) and China (its assistance in improving the facilities of the border guard corps and army). Nonetheless it is the Russian military presence which is the whole backbone of security; and not only as a collective security arrangement for external security but also as political support to the government in Tajikistan.

Simultaneously the relationship with Russia is increasingly problematic: at a crucial moment when the Taliban may be increasing its power in Afghanistan's north, the relationship with Moscow is narrowing and becoming emphatically security-related and ever more of a security guarantee against radical Islamist influence, which again easily makes the conflicts stemming from Tajikistan's civil war resurface. The fact that Russia is no longer helping to build Tajikistan as a state but, instead, seeks to increase its own military presence in the country by expanding the base system and inviting more Tajiks to serve in its own forces, undermines the legitimacy of the close relationship with Russia and leaves a large part of the population disillusioned whose experience of the greatness of the huge country they were part of in the Soviet era may yet be an asset to build the future. In this situation it is understandable that the Tajikistani government attempts to repair the social elements of legitimate relations with Russia by bargaining economic resources in exchange for Russia's military presence. Tajikistan's bargaining attitude has been met with annoyance in Moscow, where the argument per-

tains that Russia is in Tajikistan so as to avert common threats.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, the bargaining that Tajikistan's leadership can accomplish remains within the limits of the considerations relating to its own position and power in the cleaved state. All the same, such bargaining shows how the smaller party is trying to negotiate resources and expand the space of its independence within the context of its own difficult security situation and geopolitical location.

While the consequences of economic integration into the EEU cannot yet be established, the picture in the field of security is already clear: Tajikistan is being developed as a terrain for Russia's forward-pushed defense and, unlike the borderline to which the Soviet Union withdrew in 1989, the border is now a space prepared for the projection of power. Russia consolidates its base system in Tajikistan, and it also modernizes the Tajikistani army. However, it does not use nearly as many funds to renovate the Tajikistani forces as it uses for Kyrgyzstan (which in autumn 2012 was promised a sum exceeding \$1 billion, a figure which is almost double the amount Tajikistan has received since 2005). This does not signal that Russia is drawing away from the Afghan border and towards the north but, instead, that the border is becoming a wider zone of defense arrangements. The extent to which Russia also participates in the collective effort to train and equip Afghanistan and makes arrangements for security cooperation with the government in Kabul is a welcome development from the perspective of Dushanbe: rather than focusing on Tajikistan as the theater of its forward-pushed defense, Russia now moves across the border and defends Tajikistan from within the territory of Afghanistan. However, as long as Russia remains unwilling to cross the border with troops and heavy weaponry, the pressure on Tajikistan as Russia's "Afghan border" can only marginally be decreased.

These developments have buried once and for all the already initially rather weak idea that Tajikistan's Peace Accords could present an example for Afghanistan, and Tajikistan's leadership is now in the process of looking for a new role to play in mediating in the conflict. Based on the "Persian" cultural profile which has been built in post-civil war Tajikistan, the argument frequently proposed by the Tajik president has been that, because Tajikistan alone amongst the "Persian countries" has the tradition of a secular regime, it is well-positioned to act as a mediator in negotiations in which Afghanistan

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<sup>47</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Interv'iu stats-sekretaria – zamestitelia Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii."

and Iran are one party and the world community led by the Western states the other party.<sup>48</sup> The notion of cultural identity is a strategy to raise Tajikistan's diplomatic profile and help to resolve the political bottleneck of Iran, which is hampering the building of those logistical routes that would also benefit Tajikistan. While the gamble of Tajikistan's leadership in the energy field to create a financing consortium for Rogun entails a game-changing "quantum" leap, the same can be concluded in regard to an idea which attempts to appeal to actors as diverse as Iran, Afghanistan and the U.S. These diplomatic efforts convey much about the unifying identity project of the Tajikistani state and no doubt will succeed to some extent in fusing shut the ideological lines of division which the frontier towards the Taliban and the Islamic State in Afghanistan is tearing open within Tajikistan. However, these divisions can only be significantly alleviated by improving the economic situation and the social conditions of life within the country. It is for this reason that the stakes are high in the infrastructure projects of energy cooperation: should they fail, social pressures will increase and there will be political forces to utilize these; the government would further tighten its grip and political polarization would increase. In this case, the conflict smoldering beneath the surface in Tajikistan would become increasingly difficult to contain and the landscape of war and violence could also open up north of the Panj and the Amu Darya.

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<sup>48</sup> "Rakhmon predlozhit privilech' k rabote v OBSE Afganistan," *24 Mir TV*, January 23, 2014, <http://mir24.tv/news/politics/9723906>.