

U.S. POLICY IN TAJIKISTAN: FROM RECOGNITION OF ITS INDEPENDENCE TO PARTNERSHIP

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1

Tajikistan's relations with the United States are just as important for it as those with Russia and China. While relations with Russia have two equally important components (economic and political, the military dimension included) and its relations with China are economy-dominated, Tajikistan's contacts with America cannot be described in figures, at least to a much lesser extent than the relations with the two other members of the Big Three. Today, the political element, with military technical cooperation as its component, is the only significant aspect of Tajik-American relations. This absolute domination of the political element in bilateral relations is unlikely to be changed, at least in the near future.

From the very first days of its independence, Tajikistan has regarded its stable relations with the United States as a strategic task, a guarantee of its newly acquired sovereignty, which, in its turn, guaranteed the Tajiks' ethnic security and a stronger Tajik statehood. Security was, and still is, interpreted as the sum total of the political, economic, and other conditions under which the Tajiks will survive as an ethnos with an ethnic identity of its own.

The Tajik leaders were absolutely convinced that as soon as the Soviet republic adopted its declaration of independence, the United States would hasten to recognize Tajikistan's new status as an independent state. They argued that this would have been a logical political move for a country that had been the Soviet Union's political and ideological foe for many years and that had been working toward the U.S.S.R.'s disintegration. The West and the United States, however, did not hasten to take this step. This did not happen until the Soviet Union fell apart de jure.

2

After recognizing Tajikistan's independence, the United States found itself facing another difficult choice. While the other Central Asian republics reached independence as fairly united countries with commonly recognized national leaders, Tajikistan entered the new historical epoch amid a ruthless power struggle that flared up back in February 1990 while the federal state was dying. Each of the conflicting sides counted on the Americans.

U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, who visited Dushanbe in February 1992, created a new impetus for the relations between the two countries, and not only because it was the first visit of a high-ranking American bureaucrat to the newly independent state.

The visit took place amid an internal political crisis and Moscow's rejection of Tajikistan's official power; China and the European countries chose a wait-and-see policy, while Iran and its hectic

activities caused mixed feelings among the locals. Under these conditions, Tajikistan's future hinged on how the world's only superpower would treat the processes going on inside the republic and around it. The U.S. Secretary of State and the U.S. top political leaders he represented demonstrated political realism and pragmatism when they supported the Republic of Tajikistan—the Tajik state per se. In practice, this meant that from that time on the then President Nabiev had the United States behind him, while the Tajiks' choice was recognized as legitimate.

In November-December 1992, the republic's parliament inherited from Soviet times met for its 16th session in the city of Khujand. It was attended by the deputies and sides in the rapidly unfolding Tajik domestic armed conflict (represented by prominent warlords among others). The session elected a new leadership headed by Emomali Rakhmon. Prominent members of the political opposition saw no reason to hail the results, but the United States accepted them and expressed its official support of the newly elected leaders in line with the course set by James Baker's visit.

3

America's support of the official leaders made the relations between the two countries pragmatic and conflict-free. There are several other factors behind this: the consecutive U.S. administrations consistently pursued a positive course when dealing with Tajikistan. The Tajik leaders, on the other hand, from Rakhmon Nabiev to Emomali Rakhmon remained convinced that relations with the United States were of prime importance for the country's continued independent development. It was equally clear that the republic badly needed economic and political reforms, without which efficient long-term working relations with the United States would have been impossible. On the other hand, Washington expected not so much reforms themselves as at least a clearly stated intention to carry them out and the admission that they were the only and inevitable option.

It should be added that in their dealings with Rakhmon's team, the Americans demonstrated a lot of pragmatism free from any ideological considerations. In the past decade, this was obviously suggested by the fact that no immediate changes (Westernization) were possible amid the civil war and postwar rehabilitation. The Americans tried to increase their influence based on the fairly ambiguous attitude of a large part of Russia's political establishment toward Emomali Rakhmon and on the latter's obvious desire to diversify his country's foreign political aims. Finally, the Clinton Administration was fully aware that America could only achieve its aims in the country (and the region) if it relied on those in power and helped them to move forward.

In these trying years, the Tajik leaders were seeking peace in the republic, as well as a stronger state structure to better control the country and create prerequisites for better economic conditions. The country could hope to preserve its independence only if these tasks were successfully fulfilled. America approved of these intentions.

Indeed, the United States wanted stability in Tajikistan and Central Asia as a whole. It deemed it necessary to encourage the Central Asian states to cement their post-Soviet statehood as an important guarantee against a more or less consolidated pro-Russian post-Soviet expanse. Domestic conflicts and even minor collisions allowed Russia to interfere, politically and militarily, and to increase or, at least, preserve its regional role. This was what happened in the Republic of Tajikistan.

America's desire to promote the peace process, shared by the Russian Federation for different political reasons, developed into a specific and very efficient initiative. In March 1993, the Russian-American Peace Initiative was launched within a larger project known as the Dartmouth Conference; the conflicting sides were invited to participate in a series of informal meetings, which finally produced a dialog.

The project was initiated and carried out by the Russian Strategic Research Center and the Kettering Foundation of the United States under personal supervision of Vitali Naumkin, the Center's director, and Harold H. Saunders (former deputy assistant Secretary of State). The United States spared no efforts at all levels (the U.N. Security Council, OSCE, the American embassy in Dushanbe, international financial institutions and their regional and country offices) to promote the peace process and successful realization of the peace agreement. Its active and effective support for the peace process in Tajikistan, together with other political advantages, allowed the United States to oppose Russia's restored influence in Tajikistan and the rest of Central Asia.

At the same time, the United States was habitually promoting the democratization idea. It moved in two directions: a political one, which boiled down to consistent criticism of those in power of the discrepancies between what they were doing and the political norms they proclaimed. This was obvious from the U.S. State Department's annual surveys, as well as the reports supplied by other U.S. governmental agencies on the problems related to democratic developments, human rights, etc. in Tajikistan. This explains why the Americans avoided, as much as possible, direct contacts with the country's top officials. They supported, however, in different forms, those who were described as the opposition. Criticism of official power, the obvious avoidance of direct contacts, pauses in contacts at the highest level, as well as support of the opposition, which went on through the 1990s, were of a ritual nature and never presupposed any direct hostile moves in relation to the Tajik leaders.

There was another trend as well: the U.S. embassy and its structures, as well as local offices of American agencies and organizations, were engaged in educational projects based on standard educational programs implemented across the post-Soviet expanse. Officials, politicians, religious figures, businessmen, journalists, academics, post-graduate students, and students of higher educational establishments and secondary schools were given a chance of traveling to America for seminars, training sessions, work experience and other programs. They profited from extensive information about their chosen occupation, acquired new skills, received academic degrees, and had the opportunity to observe life in America at close range. They also acquired better knowledge about its political system and mechanisms, about the business activities in this country, the media, the relations between the government and the civil sector, between the government and the press, etc. By doing this, the United States was obviously pursuing long-term goals rather than immediate interests.

4

The presidential election of November 1999, in which an alternative candidate nominated by the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) was also involved, and the multiparty elections to the newly created bi-chamber parliament held in February-March 2000 (which also involved parties that belonged to the United Tajik Opposition) crowned the peace process and consolidated Tajikistan's new, post-Soviet statehood. This made it possible to move on to another priority: the Tajiks' ethnic security, which called for a set of political and economic measures to be carried out under conditions of peace and political stability. The country's leaders were involved in the process to a much greater extent than other forces; they were actively aided by the IRPT, the most influential political party, which came second after the ruling National Democratic Party of Tajikistan (NDPT). The victories scored in this sphere were closely associated with the country's positive relations with the United States.

After the domestic conflict, Tajik-American relations developed under the new conditions that took shape after 9/11 and remained very fluid both at the global and regional level.

The 9/11 events changed the nature and dynamics of the relations between the two countries. In the previous decade, the republic, the stormy domestic context notwithstanding, remained (along with its Central Asian neighbors) on the periphery of America's political interests: the Democratic Administration traditionally paid much less attention to Central Asia and the Muslim world as a whole than to other places. Indeed, Europe was actively getting rid of socialism; the East European countries were integrating into democratic Larger Europe while Russia was busy restoring capitalism on its territory. The Balkans were engaged in heavy fighting, while a sanitary cordon was being built between Europe and the Russian Federation. Under these conditions, the U.S. had no time for Tajikistan. The republic, which tried without much success to attract more attention from the United States, was doomed to the unenviable role of a supplicant.

11 September changed everything overnight. The new Republican Administration identified its foreign policy priorities as the antiterrorist struggle and democratization of the Greater Middle East. Washington's strategic priorities shifted from Europe to the Muslim East. Tajikistan and its Central Asian neighbors gained more political weight—seen from Washington, they were no longer a periphery, but instead the focus of the U.S.'s national interests.

In the past, too, the Republican administrations were more interested in the Muslim world than the Democratic administrations: all of America's military actions after World War II were initiated by the Republicans with the exception of the Carter Administration's failed military venture designed to liberate the American diplomats taken hostage in Tehran by the Iranians.

At all times, the Republican administrations demonstrated a heightened interest in the natural, particularly energy, resources of the Muslim states; besides, the Republicans are guided to a much greater extent than the Democrats by the imperatives of inter-civilizational clashes and are less inclined to be guided by the idea of promoting democratic values all over the world.

The new regional context forced each of the Central Asian countries to seek the best possible model of adaptation to the new conditions without sacrificing their national interests. Tajikistan could use the chance offered by its newly acquired strategic importance, first, to raise the level of its political relations with the United States and the West as a whole; second, to maintain its relations with Washington at a level that would not cripple the country's security; third, to use the new pattern of relations among the world's and the region's leading powers to promote and diversify its relations with Russia, China, and Iran—countries of vast economic and financial potential; fourth, to encourage these countries to invest in economic, energy, and transport-communication projects of strategic importance on Tajik territory.

In response to the appeal by President George W. Bush, Jr., the Tajikistan leaders sided with the United States and supported its plan to carry out a counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan. This time it was the U.S. that was the supplicant.

By joining the U.S.-led counterterrorist international coalition, the Tajik leaders were mainly concerned about the country's national interests. Tajikistan badly needed a stronger position as an independent state in order to preserve the Tajiks' ethnic security. This was the only way they could hope to survive as an ethnoses. The new realities made the smaller states directly dependent on their relations with the world's only superpower and its benevolence. They should side with the United States, irrespective of the motives America guided itself by. This course was the only rational and pragmatic decision ensuring the U.S. positive attitude toward Tajikistan, at least while the Republicans remained in power and continued fighting international terrorism.

The pragmatism of the country's leaders brought obvious political dividends: high-ranking American bureaucrats and influential politicians frequented Tajikistan, thus forging closer relations with the United States and its Western allies. Defense Minister Donald Rumsfeld was one of the ministers who regularly came to Tajikistan.

The U.S.'s military plans forced the U.K., France, and Japan to open their diplomatic missions in Dushanbe. Late in 2002, a delegation headed by President of Tajikistan Rakhmon came to the United States on an official visit. America's military plans added vigor to the Tajik-American partnership and diversified it. It was at that time that military-technical cooperation, both direct and within NATO's Partnership for Peace program, was launched and actively promoted. This forced the international financial structures to pay more attention to Tajikistan and its requests. It can even be said that the republic was offered the MFN treatment. From that time on, the West has regarded President Emomali Rakhmon as a reliable regional partner, while Western criticism based on Western political criteria was reduced to non-binding suggestions intended for domestic consumption in the United States, rather than for putting pressure on the Tajik leaders.

Better political relations between the Republic of Tajikistan and the United States forced the other international actors to readjust their policies accordingly. In September 2004, Moscow agreed to settle some of the problems on conditions that Dushanbe found much more favorable than before; it transformed its 201st motorized infantry division into the 201st military base, wrote off part of the republic's debt, etc. In September 2004, Iran suggested that it would finance the construction of the Sangtuda hydropower plant; in October, Russia pledged to complete the project, even though earlier it postponed this decision.

In the new situation, Tajikistan could claim control over its border with Afghanistan, which was earlier manned by Russian border guards. The process started in December 2004 on the easternmost Khorugh section; in the spring, Tajik border guards started moving to the Moscow and Panj sections. On 14 June, 2005, the process was successfully completed; on 13 July, 2005, the state flag of Tajikistan was hoisted on the westernmost (Panj) section of the border. On 19 October, the entire Tajik-Afghan border was officially transferred to the Tajik border guards in the presence of General Pronichev, who headed the Russian border guard service. These developments were made possible because the United States and the EU, which it influenced, not only announced that they were prepared to extend material and financial aid to improve border security, but also launched corresponding projects.

5

The year 2005 marked an important stage in Tajik-American relations: America's position in Central Asia was somewhat undermined by the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, which removed President Askar Akaev, and the resultant chaos, as well as the Andijan events and America's impulsive response to them. Then came the Astana SCO summit, which invited the United States to specify the time within which it would remove its bases from Central Asia and put forward an official demand from the Uzbekistan government to close down the American military base in Khanabad. In fact, the excessively ideological approach of America's nonmilitary departments endangered the political advantages achieved after 14 years of consistent efforts.

Under these conditions, Tajik-American relations, which remained at a satisfactory level, received another impetus. On 13 October, 2005, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice came to Tajikistan. This was the second official visit of the U.S. State Secretary to the Republic of Tajikistan. It meant that the relations between the two countries remained good and were moving forward. On 25 October, at the follow-up on-line press conference, U.S. Ambassador to Tajikistan Richard Hoagland said: U.S.-Tajik relations are generally quite good. We do not have dramatic ups and downs. We continue consistently to move forward as evidenced by several high-level U.S. visits to Dushanbe this year.

During her visit, the U.S. State Secretary pointed out that her country fully supported the economic and political reforms underway in Tajikistan as conducive to its long-term stability. She also said that the United States intended to continue its cooperation with Tajikistan in its fight against the new threats (terrorism, extremism, and the anti-drug campaign) evident in the region. While in Dushanbe, Condoleezza Rice preferred not to pedal the usual subjects—human rights and democratic developments. The conclusion was obvious: the Tajik leaders had tapped the difficult situation in which America unexpectedly found itself in the region because of the Kyrgyz and Andijan events to achieve even smoother and strategically mutually advantageous relations with the United States.

The sad results of 2005 and the radically changed attitude of both the regional governments and the public toward the United States, which plummeted from entirely positive in 1991 to obviously guarded, convinced Washington that it should readjust its policy regarding Central Asia. It abandoned its excessively ideological approach in favor of realism and more or less complete acceptance of reality. The State Department acquired the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, the head of which, Richard Boucher, received the post of Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs.

Washington's desire to adapt itself to the trend obvious among the de-Sovietized Central Asian republics toward a more kindred civilizational space is important evidence of the changed attitudes. The United States came to the understanding that Central Asia could no longer be regarded as part of the CIS common expanse (something that was done during the entire post-Soviet period) and that its former attitude had become unacceptable. It should be said in this connection that the United States remained resolved to build new liberal-democratic states in Central Asia. The attitudes, models, and instruments successfully applied in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, but which failed in Ukraine, proved absolutely useless in Central Asia. The fact that the Central Asian countries were treated as different from the post-Soviet expanse meant that Americans dropped their Sovietological patterns and arrived at different approaches better suited to the new regional reality.

What is important from the viewpoint of Tajikistan's national interests is that starting with the events of the spring of 2005, the U.S. has been aiding the development of the sovereign democratic and prospering Central Asian states wishing to cooperate with the United States. This was what Richard Boucher said during his visit to Dushanbe in May 2006. In the early half of the 1990s, when the republic and its neighbors demonstrated the desire to shift from the Soviet to national rails, America and some of the Western countries were talking about a shift from communism to democracy. Today, America has achieved a better understanding of the region and the local realia.

Today, Tajik-American relations are developing in limited, yet strategically important areas. Normally, it is America that demonstrates the desire to cooperate in many specific spheres. According to Richard Boucher, his country wants to concentrate on helping Tajikistan strengthen its sovereignty and security. Recently, Washington has been paying a lot of attention to the local energy projects and has gone as far as hinting at its possible involvement. In the near future, however, the hints will remain a form of political support and nothing more. They are of huge strategic importance since they might encourage the international financial institutions to become involved, in any form, in the energy projects. It will inevitably jolt the countries with necessary resources willing to secure their regional positions into more active cooperation with our republic.

In fact, the American initiatives, no matter what the American leaders assert, are aimed at reducing Russia's influence in Central Asia, containing Tajik-Iranian relations, and probably achieving Tajikistan's wider involvement in the American project in Afghanistan. The American presence is strongly felt in the political contacts, bilateral military cooperation and military cooperation within NATO partnership, technical and other assistance to the Ministry of the Interior and the Tajik border guards, as well as implementation of the IMF, WB, and the ADB projects.

The United States fully supported another presidential term for Emomali Rakhmon; it is closely cooperating with Tajikistan in the security sphere, while the international financial institutions are favorably treating the republic (a large part of its debt, nearly \$100 million, to the IMF was written off). There is a lot of talk about extensive economic cooperation, while the republic was declared to be an important ally. These are positive features of Tajik-American relations, which help to consolidate Tajikistan's independence and guarantee it.

Under these conditions, the Tajik side should fully tap the potential of independence and of the multivectoral foreign policy activities. At the same time, the republic deems it highly important to maintain its relations with America at the best possible level so as not to cross the line beyond which the U.S. might become a despotic mentor. It is equally important to preserve the achieved balance in relations with Russia, China, and the United States. This balance alone allows the United States to remain Tajikistan's strategic political partner, which the Americans find profitable, as well as the guarantor of Tajikistan's independence.

It should be said in conclusion that Tajikistan will successfully deal with its main short- and long-term tasks (ethnic security of the Tajiks, which will prevent their assimilation by the non-Tajik ethnic groups) only if it manages to pursue balanced relations with the United States, Russia, and China, and if it maintains relations with each of them that will consolidate Tajik statehood and avoid any threat to its sovereignty and integrity. So far, the Tajik leaders have been successfully coping with this task.