

TAJIKISTAN-CHINA: TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF DIRECT RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Tajikistan's relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the almost twenty-five years since direct and broad relations were restored between the two countries in the context of two overlapping trends. One of them is the striving of the Tajik leadership to acquire a reliable source of foreign funding for the republic's economic development in light of its own extremely limited financial resources. The second is the consistent implementation by the Chinese leadership of reciprocal economic-political strategies—the New Silk Road, Going Out, and the Silk Road Economic Belt.

Implementation of the first two strategies restored direct economic relations between the two countries, made it possible for Tajikistan to carry out several of its strategic infrastructural projects, turned China into Tajikistan's strategic political and economic

partner, and gave the PRC direct access to Tajikistan's raw materials, particularly mining resources. At that, implementation of the first of the Chinese strategies, the New Silk Road, raised employment in Tajikistan, saturated its market with cheap Chinese consumer goods, and, consequently, promoted social stability. Implementation of the third strategy is fortifying China's status as Tajikistan's strategic partner even more.

Nevertheless, China's stronger position in the republic is fraught with substantial risks, the main one being the lack of a practical alternative to the Republic's broad economic cooperation with its great Eastern neighbor. Tajikistan must continue to follow a multivectoral course, not only in its strictly political, but also in its economic relations with the outside world in order to avoid unilateral dependence on its strategic partner.

KEYWORDS: *Tajikistan, China, strategic partnership, new initiatives, Silk Road, Going Out, multivectoral policy.*

Introduction

The territories belonging to contemporary Tajikistan and China have, from time immemorial, been joined by direct and sufficiently developed political, economic trade, and cultural ties that were long interrupted.

Ways to restore relations between Tajikistan and its neighboring republics with China began to emerge as the Soviet state weakened in the aftermath of Gorbachev's perestroika. Kazakhstan was the first republic of the region able to take most advantage of the opportunities presented in its own interests. According to Kazakh expert Adil Kaukenov, between 1986 and 1989, trade turnover between Soviet Kazakhstan and China rose from \$3 million to 45.6 million, and by 1991, China accounted for 52% of the republic's export beyond the Soviet Union. In 1989, Kazakhstan and the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) signed an agreement on economic, technical, and trade cooperation for 1989-1995. The total cost of all the transactions envisaged under the agreement amounted to more than \$1.5 billion, while the trade turnover between them was to rise to \$220-260 million.¹ In July 1991, during the visit of the then Soviet Kazakhstan's president to the XUAR, an Agreement on the Principles and Main Development Trends of Cooperation between the Kazakh S.S.R. and Xinjiang was signed.²

Dushanbe-Beijing: The Formation of Strategic Partnership Relations in the Economy

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the PRC government promptly recognized the independence of the post-Soviet states of Central Asia (CA). It established diplomatic relations with them and opened embassies in all the capitals of the region, including in Dushanbe.

Since that time, their relations with China have risen to a qualitatively new level due to the mutual interest of each country in establishing contacts with China. Admittedly, this interest did not immediately blossom into something more significant.

After gaining their independence, the former Soviet republics of Central Asia needed to promptly build sovereign stable national states as a necessary condition for ensuring their own security and creating ways to overcome the socioeconomic difficulties generated by perestroika and the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The internal aspect of resolving this problem was and remains related to reinforcing the political and socioeconomic foundations of the newly independent states, as well as to strengthening their national identity. The external aspect lies in comprehensive implementation by the regional states of a multivectoral foreign policy. This course lies in the post-Soviet regional states establishing as extensive and diverse relations as possible with the outside world, primarily with the world poles, which are independent civilizational spaces. For the CA states, these are not only Russia and China, but also the U.S. and its Western allies, as well as the Islamic world.

These poles-spaces have political and financial-economic potential that could be tapped for resolving the political (primarily strengthening independence and statehood) and economic problems facing the Central Asian states. A multivectoral policy makes it possible for these countries to avoid becoming too dependent on any one pole. Dependence invariably means restriction or even actual loss of national sovereignty and independence.

¹ See: A. Kaukenov, "Kazakhstansko-kitaiskie ekonomicheskie otnosheniia: mekhanizmy i printsipy," available at [<http://www.kazenergy.com/ru/2-26-27-2009/3022-2011-11-23-10-57-53.html>], 1 June, 2015.

² See: Ibidem.

China borders on three (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan) of the five regional states and is also a relatively close neighbor of the other two (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan). However, when they first gained their independence, none of these states regarded China as a top priority. Hydrocarbon-rich Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan (the latter also being rich in many other raw resources) strove to weaken their comprehensive dependence on Russia inherited from Soviet times by accelerating the development of relations primarily with Western countries. Here they hoped to find a solvent sales market for their resources, as well as a source of investments, contemporary technology, and political guarantees of preserving their acquired independence.

The Western countries themselves showed a high interest in the region's resources. Gaining extensive access to them was seen as a way to weaken the dependence of the West European countries on deliveries of Russian oil and gas and to resolve the interrelated task of eliminating Russia's monopoly on access to the raw resources of Central Asia. The latter made it possible to weaken Russia's position in the region and, in so doing, make it more difficult to integrate the post-Soviet region under its auspices. Stronger independence for the new CA countries was to be the concomitant result.

Before the civil war, the Tajik authorities looked toward Iran, China, and the West and the secular opposition toward Iran and the West, while the religious opposition set their sights on Iran and the Islamic world as a whole. All the political forces acting in Tajikistan believed that the linguistic, cultural, and civilizational (pre-Islamic and Islamic) features Tajikistan and Iran have in common are good enough for successfully establishing Tajik-Iranian political and economic relations.

The choice of priorities Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan made during the establishment of multivectoral relations with the outside world essentially proved correct, particularly for the initial period of their independent existence. This largely eased them gently into their state of independence without political upheavals.

The leaders of Soviet Tajikistan were unable to follow suit. As a result, the republic gained its independence in a state of political dissidence, which has been continuously expanding and intensifying ever since. In May 1992, the political standoff in the republic had transformed into a civil war, in which the former state ultimately went up in flames, while the country itself disintegrated into essentially independent regions. The former economy disappeared along with the former state. By the end of 1992, the country was teetering on the brink of political and economic survival.

Restoration of the country's political and territorial unity and unified legal sphere began at the parliamentary session held from 16 November to 2 December, 1992. This was when the parliamentary deputies, who represented all the opposing forces, formed a new power system headed by Emomali Rakhmon in the presence of the warlords of the opposing sides.

Civil war has its own logic. It is not easy to begin, but, once done, it is much harder to bring to an end. The civil war in Tajikistan lasted for another four-and-a-half years. However, the legitimacy of the decisions made at the parliamentary session in Khujand were never seriously contested by the armed opposition, which found itself ousted from the country right after the session, primarily to Afghanistan. Abroad, it rebanded, regrouped, and, after penetrating into the republic's territory, renewed the hostilities. As the subsequent course of events showed, the continued conflict was not aimed at the opposition seizing power in Tajikistan, but at creating political conditions favoring a dignified return home for all those who had been forced to leave, with subsequent reintegration into the country's life as its full-fledged citizens.

On 5 December, 1993, the new parliament formed in Khujand began performing its functions in the country's capital, Dushanbe, and immediately encountered numerous problems. The political situation in the country remained extremely difficult. The civil war continued. The economy lay in ruins. It had begun disintegrating during the last years of the Soviet Union under the impact of the perestroika reforms, while the collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war brought it to its ultimate ruin. The country was in dire need of considerable foreign economic assistance.

Tajikistan's position was also complicated by the fact that it was far from easy for the republic's authorities to receive this assistance. The U.S. and its Western allies could have been a source of the desired assistance. However, the established opinion about the post-Communist nature of the new Tajik government had a restraining influence on the U.S.'s attitude toward Tajikistan. What is more, there were many people in the government itself who personally, or as the representatives of certain forces, had a negative attitude toward the very idea and possibility of developing relations with the West.

As for Russia, which after the collapse of the Soviet Union continued to be perceived as a friendly country in the CA states, two approaches were very evident in its attitude toward Tajikistan at that time:

- (a) that of the liberal politicians and
- (b) that of their opponents.

The position of the liberal politicians who, until the first elections to the State Duma in December 1993, possessed full political power, essentially coincided with the position of the Western countries.

In contrast to the liberals, their opponents, known as advocates of a strong state, including a large part of the leadership of Russia's defense and security structures, were inclined to cooperate with the new authorities of Tajikistan and render them help and assistance. However, the possibilities here were seriously restricted by the political influence of the liberals. What is more, Russia was facing economic difficulties itself, so it was unlikely it could render any significant economic support to Tajikistan torn by perestroika, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the civil war.

Mutual caution bordering on disdain prevented the establishment and development of widespread cooperation between Tajikistan and the rich Islamic states. The Islamic states perceived the new leadership as pro-Communist, that is, anti-Islamic, as they understood it, and were in no rush to develop economic relations with Tajikistan. And the Tajik authorities themselves at that time were suspicious of the Islamic states, justifiably believing that they were not only providing the Tajik opposition with refuge, but were also rendering them all kinds of assistance.

Nor did influential international organizations experience any particular desire to establish cooperation with the Tajik authorities for precisely the same reasons as the Western countries. It was even very difficult to arrange meetings between official representatives of the Tajik authorities and representatives of international organizations.

Finding itself in such a challenging situation only eighteen months after its acquiring independence, and without any other real choice, Tajikistan was essentially the only country in the region that decided to place the stakes on China in its striving to procure significant foreign political and economic support. In March 1993, China was the destination of Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon's first international visit.

From the political viewpoint, the visit was entirely successful. The pragmatic Chinese leaders gave Emomali Rakhmon a warm reception at the highest level. On 9 March, 1993, the heads of the two states signed a Joint Communiqué on Principles for Establishing Tajik-Chinese Interrelations in Beijing. The most important thing was that the leaders of the Chinese nation, which was rapidly gaining economic and political clout in the world, made it clear to everyone that they considered Tajikistan a dignified member of international community and its new authorities entirely legitimate, and that they intended maintaining the closest relations with it. As for economic cooperation, the visit showed that at that time the Chinese side was in no hurry to develop economic relations with Tajikistan, or with any other country of the region, in the form and volume they desired. China was fully satisfied with the existing state of affairs.

Beijing's Strategies

The New Silk Road

At the beginning of the 1990s, China adopted a strategy aimed at creating the so-called New Silk Road. It was conceived as a major infrastructural project called on to ensure China's transport access to Central Asia.³

As practice shows, at the time Emomali Rakhmon visited Beijing, China's project or strategy to revive the Great Silk Road, with respect to Tajikistan, envisaged no more than support by the Chinese authorities of the trade exchange that had been spontaneously developing since the late perestroika time between the two countries. For Tajikistan, China became one of the main sources for saturating the local markets with consumer goods. After the fall of the Soviet Union, shuttle trade with the Eastern neighbor began to develop at even faster rates. Mutual interest helped merchandise from the Celestial Kingdom to flood the country's markets.

At the initial stage of independence, Tajikistan, like the other countries of the region, had to deal with the problem of hard currency in the country. But a solution was found. This was barter. In exchange for consumer goods, commodities the Chinese market needed began trickling into China, ranging from specially bred dogs to all kinds of semi-finished products and raw materials, from cotton yarn to metal items, particularly those made from non-ferrous metals. Everything that had the slightest market value found a sales outlet in China, which acquired from the region much of what it needed for its economy for a mere pittance.

China was essentially interested in the CA countries when they first gained their independence,

- first, as a sales market for goods and,
- second, as "sponsors" capable of boosting the development of its western regions.

Since the Chinese leadership was mainly concentrating on the coastal regions during its economic reforms, manufacturing goods for the Central Asian countries and, correspondingly, the reciprocal money-commodity flows that ensued promoted the development of the provinces adjacent to the borders of post-Soviet CA.

In the situation that developed, the Chinese side did not feel any real need to spell out economic issues with the governments of the Central Asian states. For China, things were perfect the way they were. What is more, the level and nature of China's development at the beginning of the 1990s had not reached the point where it required access to the region's resources, accompanied by the need to make large investments.

Another factor conducive to China's wait-and-see position in developing economic relations with the CA countries, including Tajikistan, should also be mentioned. Legitimate development of economic relations between the region's countries and China could not begin until the territorial-border disputes were resolved. The 1990s, particularly their second half, saw intensified settlement of the existing territorial and border disputes. It is correct to say that political and economic interest in developing relations with China, on the one hand, and the difference in the political and other potential of the negotiating sides, on the other, prompted the Central Asian countries to reach an agreement on the territorial-border issues.

³ See: M. Antonov, "Vertikal vlasti i integratsiia Rossii" (quoted from: R. Alimov, *Tadzhikistan i Kitai: kursom strategicheskogo partnerstva*, Ves mir, Moscow, 2014, pp. 181-182).

Going Out

By the beginning of the 2000s, the Chinese economy had reached a level that made gaining access to hydrocarbon and other raw material resources worldwide attractive. And Central Asia was no exception. Objective interest in solving this task gave rise to the need to develop a corresponding strategy. It was drawn up and called the Going Out strategy. As early as March 2000, it was examined at the third session of the All-Chinese Assembly of People's Representatives of the ninth convocation. In addition to assisting the export of goods, services, and technology, the strategy directly envisaged supporting development of the resources the country needed abroad.⁴

Within the framework of this strategy, CA was regarded not only as a sales market for goods and services, but also as a source of raw (ores and concentrates of non-ferrous metals, as well as the metals themselves—aluminum, copper, and so on) and energy (oil, gas, electricity) resources. China's interest in Central Asian resources grew in tandem with Western Europe's growing interest toward them, which was striving to weaken its dependence on energy supplies from Russia.

As China's interest in Central Asia's resources grew, the regional countries themselves, primarily Kazakhstan, began concentrating all the more on diversifying economic cooperation, including with China. Beginning in the second half of the 1990s, the composite development of all these processes made it necessary to move to broader and more diverse forms of economic relations between the region's countries and their great neighbor.

All the same, the CA countries' economic relations with China did not begin developing as desired until after the events of 9/11, when the U.S. and its NATO allies added a significant military presence to their political presence in the region. U.S. air bases were established at Manas in Kyrgyzstan and Khanabad in Uzbekistan. A German Bundeswehr base was deployed in the Uzbek city of Termez. A contingent of French airmen was based at the airport in Dushanbe. The Western countries also manifested their military presence in the form of direct participation of American and West European servicemen in implementing different joint programs with the region's countries.

In light of the growing threats relating to the rising military presence of the West in CA, China deemed it necessary to step up implementation of the Going Out strategy. The wait-and-see policy was replaced with diverse activation of an entire set of relations—political, economic, military, information, and so on—with the Central Asian countries, both at the bilateral and multilateral level, and within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) created on 15 June, 2001.

China's interest in developing and significantly diversifying relations with the CA countries grew even more after the Color Revolution technologies began taking their toll in the CIS countries. The Rose Revolution of 2003 in Georgia and the Orange Revolution of 2004 in Ukraine led, in addition to a change in leadership in these countries, to immense fortification of the position of the U.S. and NATO in these countries. It stands to reason that China did not welcome this, but that is as far as its response went. After all, Georgia and Ukraine are not that close to its back door. However, the Tulip Revolution that occurred in March 2005 in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, during which Askar Akaev was overthrown, aroused extreme concern in Beijing. This concern grew even more after the well-known events in Andijan. Beijing clearly saw "America's hand" in what happened in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Its suspicions were confirmed when, after the Andijan events, a campaign unfolded in the U.S., and at its initiative in Western Europe as well, condemning the leadership of Uzbekistan, whereby all kinds of sanctions were introduced against the country itself.

Immediately after the tempestuous events of the spring of 2005, the Chinese leadership saw fit to increase its support of the actions of the governments of the Central Asian republics aimed at ensur-

⁴ See: M. Antonov, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-121, 125-126.

ing socioeconomic stability and, correspondingly, political stability in their countries. In so doing, the Chinese leaders sensibly considered that political stability in the territories to the west of their borders would fully serve the tasks of ensuring political stability and, consequently, security of their own western regions. In the economic respect, assistance and support was carried out by helping to implement economic programs and projects in each of the Central Asian countries.

For Tajikistan, China's decisive move toward participation in implementing economic development plans, programs, and projects in the CA countries was manifested in its lending and investment activity in Tajikistan. Within the framework of the Going Out strategy, 2006 and 2009 were peak years.

In 2006, Tajik-Chinese investment agreements on reconstructing the Dushanbe-Khujand-Chanak highway were signed and began being implemented, as well as construction of the Shakhristan Tunnel, building of the South-North Power Transmission Line-500 and the Khatlon-Lolazor PTL, and construction of the Shar-Shar Tunnel of 2.23 km in length. The proposal to build a hydropower plant on the Zerafshan River was approved. Chinese funding of these projects amounted to a total of almost \$1 billion.

In 2009, Tajikistan and China signed agreements on building the Nurabad-1 Hydropower Plant (\$560 million), a central heating and power plant in Dushanbe (\$400 million), and a cement factory with a capacity of 1 million tonnes a year, carrying out additional work at the Khatlon-Lolazor and South-North power transmission lines, and reconstruction of the Dushanbe-Dangara highway. These agreements amounted to a little more than \$1 billion.

Execution of most of the Chinese-Tajik agreements signed yielded fairly good results for Tajikistan. With the help of Chinese money and Chinese specialists, the country succeeded in creating a unified republic-wide electricity grid. It should also be noted that the turbines and generators for Sangtuda-2 Hydropower Plant built by the Iranians were manufactured at Chinese enterprises.

Extensive modernization of highways was carried out and a whole network of tunnels built with China's financial and technical participation, which made it possible for the first time in contemporary history to establish an internal republic-wide year-round functioning network of modern roads in Tajikistan. What is more, the country acquired an alternative to the only transport access to the outside world through Uzbekistan remaining from the Soviet Union, which was always being periodically closed down.

It was largely Chinese money and Chinese technical participation that made it possible, first, to stay afloat and then to develop such a strategically important branch of the national economy for Tajikistan as mining, including gold extraction. The very same thing can be said of the participation of Chinese companies in the development of the telecommunications sector, including mobile, and in the modernization of infrastructure of the capital of Dushanbe and other cities of the republic.

Summing up the implementation by the Chinese side of the New Silk Road and Going Out strategies, the following main results can be verified.

- First, trade between Tajikistan and China increased rapidly to more than \$2 billion a year. This process had its special features. Trade relations primarily developed at this time in the form of the shuttle business engaged in by a mass of individual businessmen seized by the spontaneity of risky, very indeterminate, and often dangerous commercial activity. Thanks to the activity of the shuttle businessmen, the republic's markets were inundated with a flood of Chinese commodities, which made it possible to promptly resolve the problem of the acutest shortage of consumer goods. At the beginning of the 2000s, the mass shuttle business saw its last days. It was replaced by trade companies and a corresponding trade infrastructure.

- Second, Chinese companies gained direct access to Tajikistan's mineral resources and their development with the aim of exporting them to their own country.
- Third, China carried out, or participated in, the modernization of existing and building of new facilities in the energy sphere (central heating and power plants, power transmission lines, and so on), as well as the creation of transport infrastructure (modernizing existing and building new highways and railways, tunnels, bridges, airports, etc.) and communications infrastructure (traditional, fiber-optic, and mobile) relating to China's corresponding infrastructural facilities.
- Fourth, Tajikistan, from all possible viewpoints, stopped being a terra incognita for China.

The Silk Road Economic Belt or One Belt-One Road

On 16 September, 2013, when talking at the international Nazarbaev University in Astana, PRC Chairman Xi Jinping proposed a new initiative, the gist of which was that not only the old Silk Road should be revived, but a corresponding economic belt should be created along it. The initiative rapidly began to acquire the outlines of a project that, with its land and sea components together, was to encompass almost the entire world. However, at the time it was made public, it was perceived more locally, as a new way to intensify cooperation among China, the CA states, and Russia.⁵

With respect to Tajikistan and the Central Asia region as a whole, the initiative of the Chinese leader is a natural continuation of the above-mentioned New Silk Road and Going Out strategies. During their implementation, vital parts or segments of the economic belt to be created along the revived Great Silk Road have already been built. They are already serving well the current demands of both China and the countries of the region. They are permitting the latter to solve not only strictly economic tasks, but also to strengthen their independence, since they are providing them with additional and alternative sources of political support, investments, and economic access to the outside world. However, development logic has prompted the Chinese side to join all of these separate parts and segments into a unified and well-functioning system, as well as ensure its further development. The initiative of the PRC Chairman is a step in this direction. It is providing the primary political prerequisites and is well enforced by the impressive potential of China's growing economy.

The initiative of the Chinese leader was positively received by the presidents of the Central Asian states. They have every right to believe that its implementation will bring a significant flow of Chinese money into the economy of their countries and that Chinese investments will ultimately make these countries prosperous and stable, and the population happy. This is particularly pertinent, since promulgation of this initiative was preceded by what we might call advances, whereby very substantial ones.

A week before he spoke at the Nazarbaev University, Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping paid a state visit to Uzbekistan (8-10 September, 2013). A practical result of the visit was signing agreements on the implementation of different projects totaling \$15 billion.⁶ A year later, during Uzbek President

⁵ See: A. Lukin, "Ideia 'ekonomicheskogo poisia Shelkovogo puti' i evraziiskaia integratsiia," *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn*, No. 7, 2014, available at [http://igpi.ru/bibl/other_articl/1406820606.html], 2 July, 2015.

⁶ See: "Sotrudnichestvo Respubliki Uzbekistan so stranami ATR. Uzbeksko-kitaiskie otnosheniia," available at [<http://www.mfa.uz/ru/cooperation/countries/61/>], 3 June, 2015.

Islam Karimov's state visit to the PRC, on 19-20 August, 2014, another set of agreements was signed totaling \$6 billion.⁷

On 13-14 September, 2014, the Chinese leader paid a state visit to Tajikistan. The official talks ended in the signing of agreements, under which the Chinese side pledged to issue Tajikistan loans and grants totaling \$6 billion in the next three years. Of this sum, \$3.2 billion went to building the 400-km Tajik section of the fourth branch of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, which the leaders of the two countries reached agreements on a year earlier during the SCO summit in Bishkek. During his stay in Dushanbe, Xi Jinping and Emomali Rakhmon launched the building of the gas pipeline branch.⁸

Keeping in mind that the institution of presidential power in the region's states has a certain influence on all aspects of life, the likelihood of successful realization of the initiative frequently mentioned in the media as the One Belt-One Road project or strategy is relatively high in this part of the modern world.

Nevertheless, this initiative could face challenges, which, if ignored, might have negative repercussions for its implementation in CA and place in doubt not only regional, but also broader expectations, hopes, and calculations.

In this respect, it is legitimate to ask two questions.

- First, will implementation of the initiative make it possible to join different elements into something that could be defined as the Central Asian segment?
- Second, will implementation of the initiative make it possible to transform the existing infrastructure into a full-fledged Central Asian transport corridor between China and the outside world beyond the region's northern, southern, and western borders, for which China is so striving?

There can essentially only be one answer to both questions from the financial and technical viewpoint—yes. It stands to reason that China has the necessary funds and, as the initiator of the One Belt-One Road project, is willing to become the main sponsor of its implementation in Central Asia. Nor should we forget the financial infrastructure, through which Chinese money will be allotted for implementing specific projects within the framework of the initiative. It includes both national Chinese financial institutions—China's EXIM Bank, which is widely involved in funding the projects being carried out in CA with participation of the Chinese side, the Chinese State Development Bank, and so on—and multinational financial institutions, such as the recently established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, of which 57 countries are founding members, and other similar structures within the framework of the SCO, and now also BRICS. There are no technical problems that cannot be successfully resolved with the financial resources and the scientific, technical, and technological possibilities of China and the Central Asian countries.

The difficulties involved with putting Xi Jinping's initiative to form an economic belt of the Silk Road in CA into practice belong to an entirely different category.

No matter what the co-development projects are, the positive attitude of the leaders of the Central Asian countries to this initiative alone is not enough to ensure successful implementation of these projects in the region, or in any of its separate countries. One factor that might throw a spanner in the works is the complicated relations among the region's countries.

⁷ See: *Ibidem*.

⁸ See: R.G. Abdullo, "Politichesky sentiabr v Dushanbe," available at [<http://www.islam.news.tj/ru/newspaper/article/politicheskii-sentyabr-v-dushanbe>].

The rather complicated relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are having far from the best impact on Tajik-Chinese relations. For example, due to Uzbekistan's negative position, the project to build a hydropower plant on the Zerafshan River has fallen through.

As we know, the countries on the lower reaches of the Central Asian rivers are worried about the striving of the upstream countries to expand the development of their hydropower potential. It stands to reason that China must take into account the position of the downstream countries—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. China is refraining from, but has not rejected, participation in the Tajik hydropower projects. It has made it clear that it is ready to begin implementing the signed agreement on building a hydropower plant on Zerafshan, but only after the region's countries reach a consolidated position on this issue. The Chinese side has been compensating for its lack of involvement in implementing the project by participating in building Tajik central heating and power plants. As of the present, the first line of Dushanbe Central Heating and Power Plant-2 has been built and put into operation and building of its second line has begun.

It can also be presumed that this is influencing China's cool attitude toward a new railway being planned, which should provide it with additional access to CA and further, passing through Tajikistan. Nor does China wish to participate in building a hydropower plant in Kyrgyzstan, or in implementing any large projects in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in general, which Uzbekistan might feel does not correspond to its interests.

As for relations between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, throughout President Askar Akaev's rule, they developed in the best way possible. They also developed fairly well during Kurmanbek Bakiev's presidency. Unfortunately, territorial-border, water, and transport-communication disputes have been mounting recently. Of course, these disputes and problems have existed throughout the independence of both republics. But it is only recently that they began to escalate and even turned into clashes accompanied by mass disorder and even violent action with the use of weapons. At the time this article was written, the latest in a series of such events was the clashes involving throwing stones, gunfire, and the use of Molotov cocktails on the Isfara-Batken section of the Tajik-Kyrgyz border.⁹

Certain problems are clouding Kazakhstan's relations with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan has problems with all of its regional neighbors, sometimes simply because it has a common border with all the former Soviet CA republics, and relations between neighbors, as we know, are always fraught with conflict.

It should be emphasized that the problems clouding the relations among the region's countries are objective and due to the growing pains the countries are experiencing as they make the transition from being components of a former superpower—the Soviet Union—into stable independent states. To one extent or another, all these problems can significantly complicate the practical implementation of the Chinese initiative.

Tajikistan, more than any other CA state, does not wish to find itself outside the Chinese projects that are part of Xi Jinping's initiative to create the Silk Road Economic Belt. The difficulties the Russian economy is currently experiencing significantly reduced the amount of remittances labor migrants send from Russia home, by 32% (in dollar equivalent), in the first six months of 2015 compared to the same period in 2014.¹⁰ Apart from Chinese investments, there are essentially no other significant sources of compensation for these losses.

⁹ See: P. Chorshanbiev, "Tadzhikistan obviniaet mestnoe rukovodstvo Kyrgyzstana v konflikte na granitse," available at: [<http://www.islam.news.tj/ru/news/tadzhikistan-obvinyat-mestnoe-rukovodstvo-kyrgyzstana-v-konflikte-na-granitse>], 5 August, 2015.

¹⁰ See: P. Chorshanbiev, "Obe'm denezhnykh perevodov v Tadzhikistan za polgoda snizilsia na 32%," available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/news/obem-denezhnykh-perevodov-v-tadzhikistan-za-polgoda-snizilsya-na-32>], 21 July, 2015.

China needs and will continue to need energy imports. Tajikistan, which has substantial renewable hydropower resources, could be of great interest to China. The PRC also needs CA to become a developed transport corridor for it. Tajikistan is interested in becoming part of this corridor in order to finally withdraw from the transport impasse it has found itself in for two decades now.

Specific projects must be carried out for this interest to be transformed into reality. Tajikistan indeed has such projects, and it has long been proposing that China participate in their implementation. However, advance of these projects is being hampered, as emphasized above, by the complicated relations between Tajikistan and its neighbor Uzbekistan. Keeping this in mind, Tajikistan must do everything possible to convince its Chinese partners to change their customary stance of observer to the position of an active mediator interested in positive resolution of the problems, which are not only having a negative impact on relations among the CA countries, but are also capable of causing serious conflicts in these relations. This position is usually associated with the U.S., Russia, and even the European Union, but in no way with China so far. More active Chinese participation/mediation in resolving the contradictions among the CA countries will meet not only the interests of Tajikistan and CA as a whole, but also of China itself.

China: An Attractive Partner and Reliable Ally

When talking about China's extensive involvement in the economy of Tajikistan and other CA states, it should be emphasized that it is the product of the interest of the CA states themselves. There is no need to talk of expansion or of China imposing itself on their economic life. Correspondingly, we wonder what makes cooperation with China so attractive for its Central Asian neighbors.

From the economic viewpoint, the Central Asian states are primarily attracted by China's financial investment potential. Second, China never rejects outright specific economic projects in need of its financial support. Attractive aspects, real or potential, can always be found in any project.

The fact that the Chinese officials who do the decision-making are cautious people is a positive aspect in cooperation with China. They have a responsible attitude toward the tasks they face and are guided by pragmatic end results, and not by transitory considerations and emotions.

Another important and attractive aspect for the Central Asian states and their leaders in cooperation with China is the fact that the Chinese are not tying economic cooperation to political, ideological, and other conditions. After making a decision, the Chinese do not wait long to put it into practice. If, on the other hand, for some reason, it is impossible to execute the decision made, as happened with implementation of the agreement signed with the Tajik side on building the hydropower plant on the Zerafshan River, they find a way to compensate for the damage to the other side. This is how it was in Tajikistan at least. In other words, China is a reliable economic partner.

It should also be emphasized that the Central Asian states initially regarded and continue to regard their great Eastern neighbor as a world power capable of balancing the influence of two other world powers—the U.S. and Russia—and, if necessary, toning down any possible political pressure on their part. China has already confirmed that it can be a reliable political ally. After the events in Andijan in May 2005, the U.S. and European Union put immense pressure on the Uzbekistan leadership, demanding that it immediately carry out an international investigation of the tragedy that oc-

curred. When this demand was refused, they began instigating sanctions against Uzbekistan. At that time, Beijing rendered political, moral, and material support of the stringent position of the Uzbek leadership regarding the demands of the Western countries.

The leaders of the Central Asian states regard China as a reliable partner in combating internal and regional forces that could be seen as destructive not only by the leadership of these countries, but also by the Chinese leadership, regardless of the ideas and political views—Islamic, liberal-democratic, separatist, etc.—that these forces espouse.

Are There Risks in Cooperating with the Great Neighbor?

Nevertheless, China's growing presence in the CA countries makes both its strategic rivals in the region and the region itself nervous. The strategic rivals are worried not only about China's mass presence in the region, but also about the growing striving of the leading political elites of the region to look to Beijing in search for support when serious economic and political problems arise. By responding efficiently and positively to the requests of the CA leaders, China is not only strengthening its position in CA, but also undermining to the same extent the competitive capabilities of other world forces in the region. The latter cannot look calmly at what is going on, but have to react.

Unable to compete with China in offering their services, they are left with no other choice but to convince the CA population and society that multivectoral and broad development of relations with their huge neighbor is harmful and dangerous for their countries. The arguments are built on the fact that the Chinese do not do anything without some ulterior motive, that they are trying to inflict economic bondage on the region's countries, are making claims to their territories, will carry out creeping expansion, create China towns, and so on, and so forth.

These arguments are finding an audience in the provinces. And this audience is fueling them with their own fears and concerns. What is more, a big fuss is only being made about the Chinese threat in the countries bordering on China—mainly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and to a lesser extent in Tajikistan. No critical statements toward China have been heard from Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan so far.

What are the countries bordering on China afraid of? Kazakhstan's public is worried that while their country is one of the largest contemporary states in terms of territory, it is underpopulated. Some Kazakh experts have expressed the concern that Kazakhstan's security can only be ensured if its population is no less than 60 million people. Kazakh society is also worried that Chinese companies own or control up to 40% of the country's oil and gas industry. This is all superimposed with historical memory, which is used to perceiving China as a source of existential threat.

China does not feature in the historical memory of the Tajiks as an existential threat. Nevertheless, the republic does not think that everything is favorable in its relations with China. A case in point is a comment posted by Khanifa Sadridinzoda on the Centrazia.ru website, which lists all the main claims against China. They boil down to the following.

Chinese expansion is expressed in an increase in the number of Chinese citizens employed in different spheres of the republic's economy—in consumer goods, the implementation of infrastructural projects, and in agriculture, where they are building farms. After first renting relatively small parcels of land (of no more than several dozen hectares), they then try to rent land of several tens of thousands of hectares. The Chinese use toxic chemicals, thus doing irreparable damage to cultivated areas.

In order to ensure their own business interests, Chinese businessmen actively bribe the local authorities. They are unwilling to hire local residents. Due to the inflow of foreigners, finding a job and housing in Tajikistan is becoming a serious problem for the indigenous population.

The number of mixed marriages is growing—Tajik women are marrying Chinese men, including non-Muslims. Poverty prompts them to do this. And it allows wealthy Chinese to obtain Tajik citizenship in five years.¹¹

It should be said that at the end of perestroika and the beginning of the 1990s, when the borders opened, almost the same thing was said about the Afghans, who ended up in hordes in Tajikistan. People complained that there were too many of them, that they were depriving Tajiks of a living by ousting them from commerce, that they were causing the price of housing to rise, making it unaffordable for local residents, that, being more successful and wealthy, the Afghans were overtaking local residents in matrimonial affairs, that by marrying Tajik women, they were striving to obtain Soviet and then Tajik (after the country gained its independence) citizenship, and so on. The only difference is that they are Muslims, which, for Tajik citizens brought up in the Soviet spirit, is also unacceptable, since Afghans, in their view, are far too religious.

There are still not that many Chinese in Tajikistan. True, Chinese engineers and workers are mainly employed in those projects implemented by the Chinese. According to Tajik laws, up to 70% of the people hired to work on these projects should come from among the local residents. This is what the Chinese did at first. But after a while, the local workers begin leaving, simply because they could not adapt to the way the Chinese worked—at high speed, from early morning to late at night, and with minimum breaks. Chinese workers take no more than 15-20-minute lunch breaks and eat right in the workplace. As soon as they have finished, they go straight back to work at the same high speed. And so it goes, day in, day out.

No one in Tajikistan, or anywhere else in the post-Soviet space for that matter, is used to working like this. So here we see a conflict between the Chinese managers and local workers in terms of mentality and work ethic. The locals are not satisfied with wages they receive either. As a result, they end up quitting the projects implemented by the Chinese and going to Russia in search of a job, where they earn more working in the “Soviet” conditions they are used to and where the level of mutual understanding with Russian employers is much higher.

Worries about the risks related to developing relations between Tajikistan and China expressed in the above-mentioned comment are primarily aroused by the emotional response of the indigenous residents to the changes going on around them. One such change is keeping the presence of Russians and Russian-speakers to a minimum, to whom Tajiks are already accustomed, and the appearance of new ethnicities, to whom they must still adapt. This is not an easy process and entails demolition of the established and formation of new models of ethnic relations.

What is more, there is not only an emotionally-induced sense of the risks generated by the rapid development of relations with China. There are also risks of an entirely objective nature. According to the author of this article, one of the main risks for all the CA countries is the real lack of alternative to intensifying relations with China, which is creating conditions for forming the CA countries’ unilateral dependence on China.

The lack of alternative to developing relations with China for the region’s countries, which carry out the hydrocarbon export that is the basis of their wellbeing and prosperity, is due to the fact that these relations make it possible for them to diversify not only the sales markets of their hydrocarbons and other types of raw materials and products, but also gain access to the larger outside world.

¹¹ See: Kh. Sadriddinzoda, “Tadzhikitan v kotgiakh kitaiskogo drakona,” available at [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1420447680>], 11 February, 2015.

In addition, developing relations with China is the only real way to lower its dependence on Russia in terms of delivering hydrocarbons to markets outside the CIS. After all, export of CA raw resources to markets beyond the CIS has mainly been carried out and continues to be carried out through Russian territory and by means of Russian transport-communication and other infrastructure potential. All other opportunities, apart from those generated by developing relations with China, are no more than a palliative. But this only way of ensuring real diversification of sales markets and access to the larger outside world through relations with China makes the Central Asian states dependent on their great neighbor.

For resource-poor Tajikistan, only developing relations with China can provide it with a reliable source of funding for its transportation and mining projects, as well as its projects in energy, the building material industry, and so on.

The dependence of Tajikistan's social stability on the level and nature of relations with China is becoming increasingly obvious. Due to the rapid social stratification currently going on in Tajikistan, cheap Chinese goods the poor strata of the population can afford make the social inequality less obvious, which is quite important for preserving political stability.

Nor should we forget that China and Chinese commodities gave the thousands of merchants who used to travel between their own states and China the opportunity to engage in trade. Today this kind of small shuttle business has essentially disappeared. But many thousands of residents of Tajikistan still make a living by delivering Chinese goods from wholesale markets right to the remotest corners of the republic, selling them at their stalls and shops, as well as at bazaars and in the street.

Trade with China also has an impact on the exchange rate. Whenever China closed its borders for a few days, during holidays for instance, and, correspondingly, commercial flows slowed, this immediately had an effect on the local currency rate.

Such a high lack of option in Tajikistan's and other CA countries' relations with China, as well as the dependence of socioeconomic stability on relations with their giant neighbor, is making the CA countries rather vulnerable in their relations with China. However, at the moment there is no way to overcome this vulnerability.

Offering Tajikistan participation in the EEU will not solve the problem, since by lowering its dependence on relations with China, it will significantly raise its dependence on Russia, which is fraught with the loss of a substantial part of its sovereignty. Turning to the Western world will not solve the problem either. To some extent, lowering rivalry between the two orientations—either toward Russia, or toward China—could promote the development of relations with Iran, Pakistan, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. But Tajikistan is very reticent, to say the least, about this possibility.

Of course, Tajikistan is going to have to develop cooperation with its regional neighbors, as well as develop interregional cooperation as a whole. However, this looks utopian today due to the existing contradictions among the CA countries.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Tajikistan still has no option to intensifying economic relations with China, it must try to follow a multivectoral course not only in political, but also in economic relations with the outside world simply to avoid becoming too dependent on China. Russia's example, with its extreme orientation toward the West that has developed over the past twenty-five years and caused many of its problems, serves as a lesson for Tajikistan, as it does for all the region's countries.

Successful access to the world economy and ensuring Tajikistan's national interests requires a constant and unrelenting search for ways to comprehensively diversify international relations, which is impossible without resolute rejection of the crippling ideological and political prejudices, preconceptions, clichés, and concerns inherited from the past or acquired in the present.
