

TAJIKISTAN BETWEEN RUSSIA, THE WEST, AND THE EAST

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Throughout mankind's long political history, small states have been inevitably forced to join, in one way or another, the spheres of influence of one or several powers, otherwise known as "centers of power." Some obvious disadvantages of this, the resulting provincial status, limited (or no) access to the outside world, decline in the use of the mother tongue and ethnic culture because of

forced or natural assimilation, economic dependence, and so on, went hand in hand with the obvious advantage of sustainable and peaceful development. On the contrary, changing one “traditional” patron for another was usually accompanied by social and political upheavals which sometimes deprived the small country of any future. Those which attempted to strike a balance among the interests of several power centers were rarely successful—they merely postponed for a while the need to join the sphere of influence of the geopolitical victor.

I think that Tajikistan has reached this point. In the last 150 years the Tajik nation (or rather, the part that resides in the republic) lived within the Russian center of power, first, as part of the Bukhara Emirate, then as one of the fifteen Soviet socialist republics. Starting in 1991, however, Russian influence in Central Asia has been obviously declining; therefore the republican leaders have to make important decisions, as well as a

geopolitical choice. Should the country continue to regard Moscow as the main strategic partner? A positive answer invites another question: how should relations with Russia develop in the changing conditions? A negative answer creates the problem of choosing another patron from among the centers of power acting in the region. Can Tajikistan, a small country which lived through a devastating civil war, has no influential diaspora abroad, and no considerable oil and gas reserves or industrial resources, be really independent? The choice will seal our future for many years or even decades to come in all spheres (political, economic, cultural, linguistic, social, etc.).

Russia’s presence in Central Asia is shrinking because of the growing American influence; China and several Muslim countries (Turkey and Iran) have already betrayed their interest in the region. We can expect the EU to do this in the future. The choice is limited to several alternatives.

First Alternative: Russia

I cannot agree with those who say that Russia is rapidly losing its influence in Tajikistan. Moscow is still Dushanbe’s geopolitical partner, while there are several factors behind its influence in our republic.

First, the economic factor. According to official data, every year up to 300,000 Tajik citizens (or one million, according to unofficial figures) migrate to Russia in search of seasonal employment. Every year these people send hundreds of thousands of dollars back to their families, thus creating one of Tajikistan’s main hard currency sources. In fact, Russia is the only country where hundreds of thousands of unemployed Tajiks can earn money to support their families. If Russia tightens the registration conditions for the Tajik migrants (about which the media of both countries have been talking for some time), the political situation in Tajikistan will be significantly affected.

Tajikistan is connected to the rest of the world by transportation means that cross Russia: the republic is exporting its key commodities (aluminum and cotton) via Russia. Until recently, a Tajik citizen wishing to leave the CIS had to go to Moscow, the only city (except Bishkek and Almaty) connected by regular flights to the capital of the Tajik republic. So far, Russia still is the only source of fuel and lubricants (Tajikistan has no gas and oil reserves) for our republic; Tajik industrial enterprises (mainly dating from Soviet times) depend on Russian raw materials, Russian equipment, and Russian spare parts.

Second, the military-political factor. The above suggests that the economic levers are in Moscow, which can easily turn them into political instruments. The 201st Russian division is permanently deployed in Tajikistan together with Russian border guard units. Despite their neutral status, their presence in Tajikistan makes Russia’s influence quite tangible. In addition, Dushanbe and Moscow are connected by several international agreements, the key one being the Collective Security Treaty of some of the CIS countries.

There is another, frequently ignored, factor, which can be described as cultural-psychological. There is no other post-Soviet state, the political and intellectual elite of which is as pro-Russian as it is in Tajikistan.

This is largely caused by the fact that the absolute majority of the Tajik political and public figures were educated in the Russian Federation or in other Union republics. There is essentially no one in top positions in the government, the presidential administration, the parliament, or even in the foreign ministry, who was educated in the West or has good command of English. Ideas about the West and the mentality and world outlook of the bureaucrats and intellectuals are mainly formed by the Russian media, which are still essentially the only source of information about the world for the majority of our population.

No wonder that independence was acquired in 1991 on the initiative of the Russian leaders rather than because the republic wanted it. At that time Tajikistan, as well as the majority of the Soviet republics, wanted to preserve the slightly readjusted Soviet Union according to the plan suggested by Mikhail Gorbachev. But the Russian leaders headed by Boris Yeltsin followed a logic of their own. The Soviet republics differed greatly where their social and economic development levels were concerned: the republics in the European part were much more developed than the Central Asian republics. This meant that if the Soviet Union had survived, Russia would have been expected to pay for the inevitable social and economic reforms. According to what Timur Gaidar, Russia's acting premier in 1991-1993, and his closest circle thought, it would have been much wiser to concentrate the RF's material and financial resources inside the republic in order to reach the West's development standards. Having achieved this, Moscow could always come back to Central Asia on new conditions and with new potentials. At that time nobody believed that the Central Asian republics might leave the Russian zone of influence. The CIS was devised as a means of keeping the former Soviet republics within this zone without offering them any help in their economic and social development.

On the whole, the history of Russian influence in independent Tajikistan can be provisionally divided into three periods.

- The first, a very short one, can be described as a period of democratic solidarity that started when the Soviet Union disintegrated and the convinced democrats headed by Yeltsin came to power in Russia. At that time, the Russian leaders deemed it necessary to support all democratic movements in the post-Soviet expanse that opposed the local communist elites. In Tajikistan this took the form of support of the local democratic opposition (early 1991-mid 1992); in September 1992, the democratic organizations, together with the local Islamists, deposed Rakhmon Nabiev, Tajikistan's first president, and set up a coalition government.¹
- During the second period, the Russian leaders demonstrated a more pragmatic approach to relations with the Central Asian republics. It was at that time that the democratic idealists were replaced by professionals who had different ideas about what Moscow needed in Central Asia. They were convinced that pro-Russian political movements should have been supported irrespective of their ideologies, while the Tajik democrats, in their opinion, were mostly nationalists who looked at the Muslim East or, at best, at the West. In practice, this meant that Russia switched its support to the pro-communist Popular Front, which by early 1993 translated it into control over nearly the entire country.

For several years Moscow dominated the Tajik political scene. The government needed Moscow to neutralize the armed opposition, to strengthen central power, and to restore the ruined economy. Russia was instrumental in signing the inter-Tajik Peace Treaty in June 1997, prompted to a great extent by the mounting threat from the Taliban. To bring the peace treaty to fruition as quickly as possible, Moscow used all the channels of its influence on the Tajik and Afghan leaders, who supported the United Tajik Opposition (UTO).²

- The third period began in 2000 when Vladimir Putin was elected president. By that time it had dawned on many in Russia and beyond that the Kremlin's economic, military, and financial

¹ See: V.L. Bushkov, D.V. Mikul'skiy, *Anatomia grazhdanskoy voyny v Tadzhikistane (etnosotsial'naia i politicheskaia bor'ba)*, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, RAS—Institute of Practical Research, Moscow, 1997.

² See: P. Mullojanov, "The Islamic Clergy in Tajikistan since the End of the Soviet Union," in: *Islamic Area Studies*, ed. by St. Dudoignon, K. Hissao, Kegan Paul International, London, 2001, pp. 221-252.

potential was not equal to the ambitious aims of the early 1990s. This was becoming gradually clear during Yeltsin's presidency when the country proved unable to cope with many geopolitical aims. Russia's influence in Central Asia was shrinking, not because the local elites wished so, but because Moscow proved unable, to a growing degree, to meet the region's economic needs. First, Russia could not offer large long-term investments and economic aid; second, it proved unable to protect the Central Asian republics against internal and external threats (posed by the Taliban or the local opposition movements).

There was the opinion in the Russian expert community that Russia was vague about its aims in Central Asia. This is not entirely true: Russia is aware of its interests, but does not have enough resources to pursue them. The real extent of its retreat became obvious after 9/11 when State Secretary Colin Powell asked Moscow for permission to use several aerodromes in Central Asia to support the counter-terrorist operation in Afghanistan. Moscow said, "No." The Americans turned to the local governments and got a "Yes."³

As a result, the red line of Russia's zone of influence, drawn when the Soviet Union fell apart and tacitly observed for nearly ten years, was finally crossed. However, Tajikistan is still more pro-Russian than the majority of its neighbors. At the same time, recent Russian-Tajik talks about the future of Russia's military presence in the republic have been stalling. According to the local press, Russia might remove its border guards from the border with Afghanistan; Moscow believes that Dushanbe is formulating unacceptable conditions for the continued presence of the 201st Russian division in the republic.

There may be different reasons for the unexpected stubbornness of the Tajik side: either it has an alternative to Russia's influence, or the republic has acquired a different geopolitical orientation.

Second Alternative: The West

The United States and its allies are the second and dynamically developing pole of power in Central Asia, which made its appearance in the region just recently. During Clinton's presidency the Americans preferred to keep away from the republics, part of the traditional zone of Russia's influence.

The situation changed when George Bush was elected president; the group of his closest advisors created a new foreign policy doctrine according to which Washington had to exploit the opportunities created by the Soviet Union's disintegration as much as possible. Put in a nutshell, this means that the United States should not merely respond to the developments worldwide, but prevent the emergence of new superpowers.⁴

The region's geopolitical importance looks different within the doctrine's context. When it disappeared from the map of the world, the Soviet Union left a geopolitical vacuum in Central Asia to be filled by either Russia or China (the latter being a rapidly growing power with unpredictable potential). Control over the region will, over time, make either of them the second superpower. On the other hand, strategic access to regional oil and gas reserves will impinge on OPEC's opportunity to dictate world fuel prices.

We should also bear in mind that the negative demographic and economic-social factors threaten destabilization, which could bring radical Islamic movements to power. This suggests that the current secular regimes (which leave much to be desired from the point of view of democratic standards and principles) should be supported.

Back in 2001 when Washington was preparing for the counter-terrorist operation in Afghanistan and negotiated with the Central Asian republics the possibility of using their territories for air bases, no one could have predicted just how difficult the campaign would be. The Americans, therefore, did not

³ See: A. Aleksandrov, "Amerikantsy obzhivaiut Tsentral'nuu Aziuu," *Rossia i musul'manskiy mir*, IV, RAS, Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, Bulletin, No. 6 (120), 2002, pp. 102-112.

⁴ See: N. Lemann, "The Next World Order," *The New Yorker*, 1 April, 2002, pp. 42-48.

grudge promises. The leaders of Uzbekistan, on the territory of which the largest of the American airbases was deployed, expected a lot from the American presence. It turned out later, though, that the United States was in no hurry to fulfill the majority of its promises.⁵ The possibility of greater American influence in the region is becoming increasingly problematic because of the Iraqi developments and the gradually growing tension in Afghanistan (to say nothing of the U.S.'s domestic problems). Washington is unlikely to have enough resources to pay for its full-scale presence in Central Asia.

At the same time, the United States has betrayed no intention of leaving the region or curtailing its presence. It seems that it will opt for an intermediary alternative, whereby retaining its present network of American bases, or even expanding it slightly, instead of pursuing a widespread military presence. This will allow Washington to rapidly deploy its troops there in case of need.

American aid, both financial and political, will go to the local pro-American regimes.

This gives Tajikistan, its experience of cooperation with the United States being fairly limited, an opportunity to extend these contacts, possibly by cutting down Russia's presence in the country to a certain extent.

Third Alternative: The East

There are other centers of power which, so far, have no important role to play in Central Asia. Potentially they can increase their role to different degrees. I am primarily referring to China, the dynamic economic and military progress of which is arousing increasing concern among its neighbors. China is seeking stronger influence in the region for a number of reasons. Its increasing economic and political potential will inevitably suggest that the country should work actively to boost its influence in Central Asia. Today, we can only speak about its accelerating economic expansion: Beijing is actively advancing its small and medium businesses in the region and encouraging labor migration of its citizens to the local states. This helps China alleviate unemployment back home.

This, however, may cause negative consequences for the Central Asian states. Chinese (and Indian, for that matter) industry is often described as parasitic: it is developing by saturating foreign markets with cheap and low-quality goods. Developed economies can withstand this attack (their middle class prefers local, even if more expensive, goods) while the Third World industries (the light industry especially) crumble under the pressure, causing social and political tension. On the other hand, the majority of the Chinese labor migrants move to the social niches already occupied by the local people: wholesale and retail trade, public catering and shuttle trading. As a rule, this still very weak stratum of small and medium-sized local entrepreneurs proves unable to compete with the Chinese and is going out of business. The advantages of China's economic expansion are very doubtful, especially in Tajikistan, where unemployment is high, while small and medium-sized business is just developing.

It should be said that Chinese businessmen have not yet reached our republic, yet lobbying groups are already in place, campaigning for restrictions on Chinese involvement or for privileges for Chinese businesses. In any case, if the Tajik government fails to take adequate measures to protect national businessmen, the country may have serious social problems in the future.

Early in the 1990s a lot was said about possible reorientation toward some of the Muslim states, Turkey and Iran in the first place. Ankara was looking forward to this with great anticipation: its political leaders regarded Central Asia as an element of the revived Great Ottoman Empire.⁶ Time has shown that neither Iran nor Turkey has enough resources (at least in the near future) to gain a serious geopolitical foothold in the region. For linguistic and cultural reasons Tajikistan is close to Iran, yet the secular-minded political and intellectual Tajik elite is looking at the clerical regime with a share of prejudice.

⁵ As a Russian expert puts it, Americans bought Central Asia on credit.

⁶ See: V. Egorov, "Rossia i Turtsia—linia protivorechii," *Blizhniy Vostok i sovremennost*, No. 9, 2000, pp. 320-330.

C o n c l u s i o n s

- In the next few years, American influence will mount in Tajikistan, while Russia's influence will remain traditionally strong, even if on the slight decline. There will be no dramatic changes in this sphere in the near future.
 - In the next decade Tajikistan will balance between the two main centers of power in Central Asia: Russia's traditional presence and America's growing influence. Much will depend on the country's leaders.
 - The situation in the country will be greatly affected by the foreign policy factor: Tajikistan's domestic situation directly depends on the situation in the region and beyond it, primarily in Russia and Afghanistan.
 - Whatever the case, our country has the unique chance of developing its statehood without becoming directly drawn into the geopolitical sphere of influence of any one power, but in so doing bearing in mind, at the same time, the interests of two or several power centers present in the region.
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