

TAJIKISTAN AT TWENTY-FIVE

PAUL STRONSKI

With the West's future in Afghanistan unclear, Iran on the verge of opening up economically, and Russia flexing its muscles in Ukraine and the Middle East, the geopolitical landscape is shifting around Tajikistan. The country's president, Emomali Rahmon, who has run Tajikistan since 1992, faces multiple economic, political, and social challenges at home. Yet, as the leader of a small, poor post-Soviet state located between Afghanistan, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, Rahmon has limited control over the changing foreign policy environment in which he acts.

He likewise has limited ability to jump-start Tajikistan's economy. That is a problem because the Tajik economy is not just limping along, it is barely crawling with few prospects for improvement in the near term. Many Tajiks have grown used to life abroad as migrant laborers, but migrant opportunities are declining as the Russian and Kazakh economies contract—a serious problem given that remittances are key to poverty reduction in Tajikistan. Rahmon regime is nervous about the social and political instability that may result if a large-scale return of migrant workers occurs or if reduced remittances further lower the living standards of average Tajiks.

Rahmon's response to these geopolitical and economic challenges has been to try to consolidate his hold on power by cracking down on rivals and critics, often—and misleadingly—painting them all as Islamic extremists. He offers no bold policy proposals. Instead, he follows a tried-and-true post-Soviet approach of launching showcase

projects, such as constructing the world's tallest flagpole, a teahouse at an estimated cost of \$60 million (1 percent of the country's GDP), and a city built from scratch in the middle of the desert. While the Tajik government describes these construction projects as job creators and engines for growth, they more often recall Soviet centralized urban planning, will stretch Tajikistan's already-strapped state budget, and will provide ample opportunity for graft in a country where corruption is a major problem. None of this supports socioeconomic or political stability, or improves this impoverished state's ability to provide for even the basic needs of its population.

THE ROAD TO ECONOMIC RUIN

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Eurasia. In 2014, its per capita GDP was estimated \$2,700, roughly on par with the African states of Lesotho and Cote d'Ivoire. The United Nations Population Fund estimated in 2012 that more than

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50 percent of Tajiks lived below the poverty line, a figure that is unlikely to have improved much since then due to the economic crisis that has gripped the entire Eurasian landmass. Due to its mountainous terrain, harsh winters, and scarcity of arable land, the country also is plagued by chronic food insecurity.

Many Tajiks struggle to make a living. Although the official unemployment rate in Tajikistan was a low 2.5 percent in July 2015, Tajik government statistics are unreliable. The International Labor Organization's Global Unemployment Trends data suggest the real unemployment rate is closer to 10 percent. Neither figure truly accounts for underemployment, which also remains high, nor the fact that about 1 million Tajiks citizens—more than 10 percent of the country's population—have been forced to move to Russia for migrant labor. The lack of employment prospects also forces some Tajiks to make a living by turning to the country's large black market, which consists mainly of smuggling of drugs and other illicit goods. The underground economy allows many Tajik families to muddle through hard times, but it is not a long-term recipe for political or social stability for the government as a whole.

Tajikistan is highly dependent on remittances, which are the country's largest source of hard currency. In 2012, the World Bank estimated that remittances constituted more than 50 percent of the country's GDP. Russia and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan are the main destination countries for emigrating Tajik laborers. The (often extended) families of these workers frequently depend on these remittances to maintain their standard of living. All this dependence makes Tajikistan very vulnerable to Russia's growing economic difficulties, which are caused by the combined pressure of low oil prices, the costs of integrating Crimea and funding the wars in Ukraine and Syria, and Western sanctions imposed in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

Russia's economic problems caused remittances to Tajikistan to fall dramatically over the course of 2015. According to the Russian Central Bank, remittances to Tajikistan fell from \$1.7 billion in the first half of 2014 to \$696 million

for the same period in 2015. The World Bank estimates the payments will see another significant drop this year. This will hit the purchasing power of poorer Tajik households—many of which had been lifted out of poverty since the mid-2000s due to remittances from relatives who are working in Russia.

Reduced remittance flows have already contributed to a decline in the value of the Tajik currency by almost 17 percent relative to the dollar since January 2015. Tajikistan is highly dependent on food imports, the price of which is generally denoted in U.S. dollars. Worryingly, remittance flows and the declining value of the currency increases the likelihood that more Tajik households could become food insecure. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development, about a third of Tajikistan's population is considered to be food insecure with 30 percent of that figure experiencing "severe" food insecurity. Food insecurity impacts Tajik children particularly hard: 12 percent of children under age five are underweight, while 26 percent of children in the same age group experience stunted growth due to malnourishment. These figures could get worse as regional economic trends deteriorate, which is especially a problem given that Tajikistan has some of the worst health indicators in the Eurasian region.

The declining value of the currency prompted the Tajik National Bank in 2015 to spend between \$1.5 million and \$3 million per day from its reserves to prop it up. It also banned private currency exchange outlets. These types of moves were taken as temporary measures to promote greater currency controls, but they actually spur black-market trading in dollars and stoke inflation.

The chances for Tajiks to move to Russia for migrant work are becoming more limited due to Russia's economic problems and new, tougher Russian regulations on migrant workers from countries that are not members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the regional integration project promoted by Russian President Vladimir Putin. These tougher regulations are geared toward strong-arming economically weak and remittance-dependent former Soviet states into joining the EEU. Russia's hardball tactics have worked on both Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, the newest and economically

weakest members of the EEU. For now, Tajikistan is resisting joining the body and, as a result, its citizens face greater administrative and bureaucratic hurdles than do Armenians or Kyrgyz in moving to Russia for migrant labor.

Russia's economic downturn and the increasing difficulty of obtaining work permits, however, are making Russia a less desirable destination for Tajik workers than before. Russian migration statistics show a 16.1 percent drop in the number of Tajiks living in Russia over an eight-month period in 2015. Although one must be wary of accepting these statistics at face value given growing anti-immigrant sentiment in Russia and the Kremlin's efforts to placate nationalist groups, it is clear that at least some reverse migration is taking place.

Dushanbe remains under deep economic and political pressure from Moscow that will likely increase as stability concerns in the region rise and as Russia pledges greater political and security assistance to respond to growing concerns about insecurity along Central Asia's southern border with Afghanistan. It remains unclear how long Dushanbe can withstand that pressure, particularly given the potential for social and political instability that any large-scale return of migrants from Russia could pose for the Rahmon regime. At the same time, however, Russia is in a difficult balance, trying to apply pressure on Dushanbe with these new migration rules without yet fully enforcing them. Doing so would risk destabilizing Tajikistan, which Moscow might silently recognize is not in its long-term interests.

LITTLE HELP FROM NEIGHBORS

At one point, Russia might have been willing to rescue Tajikistan from economic ruin in return for political and economic concessions. But the Russian government now has fewer financial resources to influence places like Tajikistan. For example, Russia was in arrears in paying salaries to local workers in 2015 at its military base in Tajikistan—purportedly a key bulwark in Russia's defense against regional instability emanating from Afghanistan. These arrears led to local protests. Russia's economic troubles will make it difficult for Moscow to meet the financial commitments it has made

to its former Soviet neighbors, including a recently pledged grant of \$1.2 billion in military aid to Tajikistan. Russia also indicated it would increase its troop presence in Tajikistan by 2,000 troops to a total of 9,000 by 2020. Moscow appears to be trying to take advantage of regional instability to justify and even expand its presence in Tajikistan. Tajikistan, however, should not count on Moscow's commitments given recent Russian economic trends.

China appears to have the money and staying power to remain involved in Tajikistan and Central Asia as a whole for the long term. It is Tajikistan's main trading partner, largest creditor, and a major investor in Tajikistan's energy sector (mainly oil and gas exploration) and mining sector (gold). Chinese companies have won tenders to build roads, tunnels, and other transportation links, as well as to work in the Tajik construction sector. China's largest investment in the country is Line D of the Central Asia–China gas pipeline, which will connect China with Turkmenistan's gas fields through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Beijing also has an initiative for a new Silk Road, an ambitious \$40 billion effort to create China's own economic integration project and improve transportation links to bring the country's manufactured goods to markets in Central Asia and, eventually, Europe. Furthermore, as dollars become scarce in Tajikistan, the country's businesses increasingly are turning to the Chinese yuan. The growing use of the yuan, highlighted by a September 2015 currency swap deal valued at more than 3 billion yuan between the two countries, is a clear indication of China's economic importance to Tajikistan.

China's main goal in the region is not to jump-start economic development for Central Asia's own sake. Instead, it seeks to promote trade throughout the region to help fuel China's economy and help stabilize China's east. Beijing's second goal is to prevent political and socioeconomic instability in the region, which could easily bubble over from Tajikistan or elsewhere in Central Asia into its territory, particularly China's Xinjiang province, which has a large Muslim population.

However, the influx of Chinese investment—at least the way it has played out so far—has marginal ability to promote social stability. Chinese investment is helping to enrich Tajikistan's elite, but it does little to improve the plight of average Tajiks. For example, Chinese investors in Central Asia generally import labor from China instead of hiring local workers. This might be good for Chinese stability as underemployed populations are sent overseas to work, but it limits the ability of Chinese investors to contribute to reducing Tajikistan's high unemployment rate, and its risks a popular backlash against Chinese migrant labor.

China's recent economic troubles also now raise questions about how sustainable its commitment is to an impoverished land-locked country like Tajikistan. Kazakhstan, a regional economic power, and Uzbekistan, a regional military power, are likely more important to China. Kazakhstan in particular is seen as a key node in China's ambitions to build east-west transportation infrastructure linking China to lucrative markets in Europe and the Middle East, while Tajikistan's geography relegates it to routes heading south.

Despite close cultural and linguistic ties, geography and sanctions have prevented Tajikistan from developing robust economic ties with Iran. The government has identified Iran as key state to help diversify its trading partners, and Iranian trade and investment is on the upswing particularly in hydropower, transportation, and consumer goods sectors. The gradual removal of international sanctions on Iran could help expand and grow those ties, however, it is unlikely to occur in the immediate future. Dushanbe will remain wary about Tehran's ideological agenda. It has long tried to limit cultural and religious exchanges, fearing radicalization of its own population. Iran's December 2015 decision to invite the exiled leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which is banned in Tajikistan, to attend an international religious conference in Tehran and meet with Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei caused a diplomatic dispute between the two states. The current Tajik leadership's fear of Iran likely will continue for as long as it is in power, potentially keeping Iranian influence in check for the foreseeable future.

Tajikistan's closest and most unstable neighbor is Afghanistan. The drawdown of U.S. and ISAF forces from Afghanistan is occurring at a time when instability is bubbling from the south of that country to the north—along Tajikistan's southern border. Dushanbe certainly welcomes U.S. President Barack Obama's decision to keep roughly 10,000 troops in Afghanistan through the end of his term. Regional governments, however, remain wary of U.S. commitment to the region after the Obama administration leaves office.

The Afghan-Tajik border remains particularly unstable—a problem given the Taliban's advances in northern Afghanistan. Relatively porous, it is a lucrative smuggling zone, which facilitates the flow of narcotics, weapons, and other illicit goods—all of which pose security threats. Tajik government officials reportedly are complicit in some of this illicit smuggling. Clamping down on that illicit trade and cleaning up corruption in governance is an obvious solution to this problem, but such actions could stoke tensions among the Tajik political elite and regional leaders—many of whom function more as warlords than government officials.

REGIONAL UNCERTAINTY

Tajikistan also faces political uncertainty from its Central Asian neighbors, as potential succession crises loom in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—the region's two most powerful and influential states—and the situation in Afghanistan remains volatile.

Uzbek President Islam Karimov and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, both in their seventies, have each been in power for around twenty-five years, are reportedly ill, and lack clear successors.

Although Uzbekistan lacks a dynamic economy, it has the power to meddle with its smaller neighbor, if it chooses to do so. The two countries have a complicated relationship due to Uzbekistan's intervention in the Tajik civil war of 1992–1997, in which Tashkent provided military support to pro-government forces to fight the opposition, although Tashkent later soured on the Rahmon government.

Rahmon and Karimov reportedly have long had a strained relationship. Tajik elites still resent the Soviet decision to include Samarkand and Bukhara—two largely Tajik-speaking cities—in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, although they have little power to do anything about it today. Uzbekistan has also been willing to impose economic pain on Tajikistan by halting gas supplies and periodically closing border crossings during times of tension in the bilateral relationship. The construction of the Rogun Dam, a planned hydropower plant in electricity-deprived Tajikistan that downstream Uzbekistan fears will deprive it of the water resources needed to sustain its cotton crop—the staple of the Uzbek economy—is a severe point of contention between the two countries.

Geographic distance gives Kazakhstan, which does not share a border with Tajikistan, less ability and incentive to bother with Tajikistan's internal affairs, but it remains an important trading partner. But any political or economic instability surrounding political succession in Astana could blow back on Dushanbe because Kazakhstan is the second most popular destination for Tajik migrants after Russia.

Another of Tajikistan's neighbors, Kyrgyzstan, appears to be perennially unstable. There are ethnic Tajik enclaves inside Kyrgyzstan, and the two countries have a history of ethnic clashes and border disputes. Only half of the 300-mile border has been delimited. Communities on each side of the border also compete for water resources.

Global warming and glacier melt increase environmental hazards and the likelihood of a devastating natural disaster to which Tajikistan would have limited ability to respond. There are six large glaciers in the Pamir Mountains in Tajikistan. Since the early 2000s, glacier melt has led to several instances of rock and ice avalanches, the failure of glacial ice dams, overflow or bursting of glacier lakes, and flash flooding along rivers and landslides—all of which destroy crops and devastate communities. For example, glacial melt and water runoff in 2015 triggered mudslides and caused floods, displacing more than 1,000 people in

Tajikistan. The flooding cut off electricity to 80 percent of the communities in the Kuhistoni Badakhshon Autonomous Region of Tajikistan, according to a United Nations Rapid Emergency Assessment Team. Preliminary Tajik government estimates put the damage to the country's water, energy, and transportation systems at \$100 million.

Tajikistan does not have the capacity to respond to these environmental challenges, which also will impact Tajikistan's neighbors. Furthermore, while the short-term effects of glacial melt will lead to greater water resources for Tajikistan for the next three decades, the reduced size of glaciers by 2050 likely will lead to less glacial melt water in Central Asian rivers and more frequent droughts—potentially causing greater friction with Uzbekistan and other neighbors over water resources. The long-term implications of less glacial melt water also pose questions about the viability of Tajikistan's plans for the Rogun dam and hydro-electricity generation in general.

SQUEEZING OUT THE OPPOSITION

Facing these challenges, Rahmon is trying to shore up his base and reduce the already-limited space the political opposition has to operate in the country. The Tajik president seems to have learned a lesson from his 2013 reelection. That vote was highly flawed, but it was one in which two credible opposition parties—the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, the country's second-largest party, and the Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan—surprisingly united in coalition to nominate a common candidate. This opposition candidate was later forced from the race by the Rahmon regime for allegedly being unable to garner enough signatures to remain on the ballot.

The lesson that Rahmon took away was that an even harsher approach to the opposition was needed. During the parliamentary election in March 2015, the two major opposition parties did not stand a chance, due in part to biased media, voting irregularities, political pressure, and the trumped-up prosecution and conviction of an opposition leader.

The new Tajik parliament is dominated by the president's party, along with a handful of supposed opposition groups that in reality are loyal to the government. This parliamentary election was the first time since the end of the Tajik civil war in 1997 that the IRPT and the Communists were denied even a minor voice in the legislative body. The IRPT and the Communist Party were both stripped of the two seats they each held in the previous parliament.

This move to sideline the opposition essentially broke the power-sharing deal between the government and its critics that ended the civil war. That accord decreed that 30 percent of government positions were to go to opposition parties.

The marginalization of the opposition risks pushing legitimate dissent underground, and the IRPT appears to be Rahmon's primary target. Throughout much of 2015, the Tajik government gradually closed the space in which the IRPT was allowed to operate. In March 2015, imams at several mosques called for the disbanding of the IRPT, then the only government-recognized Islamic party in Central Asia. Many of these imams reportedly received instructions from the state-run Committee of Religious Affairs to urge Tajiks during the pre-election campaign period to vote for the president's party. In summer 2015, local-level IRPT party officials were pressured to defect from the party to the government, effectively closing down the party's regional infrastructure. The IRPT's ability to disseminate information was further constrained by the closure of its printing press, allegedly for health-code violations. Government officials also closed and sealed the party's headquarters. Dushanbe has tried to mop up whatever was left of the party ever since.

Long-time IRPT leader Muhiddin Kabiri now lives in exile in Istanbul. In September 2015, the Tajik Supreme Court labeled the IRPT, which is estimated to still have roughly 40,000 remaining members, "an extremist and terrorist organization" and banned it. Several prominent IRPT members remaining in Tajikistan were arrested in October 2015 and extended family members of Kabiri were detained in late 2015.

The regime is also intensifying its efforts to remove symbols of foreign Islamic influence—namely, the hijab and other veils as well as "Arabic-style" beards, as one police chief reportedly put it—from the public space through antireligious campaigns that are meant to root out extremism, but recall heavy-handed tactics of the Soviet era. The fixation on removing the symbols of Islamic influence largely moves religious dissent underground, undermining the government's ability to monitor the extent to which extremist ideologies are attractive to Tajik youth and hampering its ability to distinguish between real and perceived extremist threats.

Although there is evidence of growing extremism emanating from Afghanistan, including reports of a budding Islamic State presence near the Afghan-Tajik border, the lack of free media and transparency in governance make it difficult to determine the true extent of support for radical ideologies inside Tajikistan. The spring 2015 defection to the Islamic State of a top police official—who repeatedly participated in international (including U.S.-sponsored) antiterrorism training programs—raises questions about the competence Tajik security forces and the regime at large, which failed to identify a top government official as holding radical views. It is hard to determine what motivated that official's defection, but it is quite likely that the harsh regime tactics against the IRPT and its supporters risks increasing the attractiveness of more radical groups or ideologies, including within the government itself.

The Rahmon regime also frequently points to Islamic extremist threats as a boogeyman to explain away all of the country's ills and justify its authoritarian policies. The government, for example, quickly and successfully put an Islamic spin on the September 2015 clashes between forces led by the then recently appointed deputy defense minister Abduhalim Nazarzoda and the state security forces in which Nazarzoda was killed. The evidence of Nazarzoda's ties to Islamic groups is weak, and the violence is more likely the result of the regime's efforts to squeeze out a wealthy warlord, who had been given a government title and responsibilities. The campaign against Nazarzoda recalls previous efforts to

sideline and weaken the power of former warlords or potential rivals to Rahmon—many of whom were either assassinated in government military or police operations, or were captured and subject to extended incarceration—effectively a death sentence in Tajikistan. As the country’s financial situation deteriorates, Rahmon’s efforts to squeeze out rivals and expand his control throughout all sectors of the economy and regions of the country could ironically stoke this sort of instability.

Finally, the Rahmon regime is also cracking down on what it perceives to be corrupting Western influences. In 2014, the mayor of Dushanbe banned rock and rap music from the capital’s buses, arguing it was “alien” to Tajik culture. In April 2015, the head of the country’s security service accused nongovernmental organizations that receive foreign funding of being a threat to state security and of acting against the interests of Tajik society. This raised speculation about Russian influence in the country and how far Rahmon will go in following Russia in further expanding limitations on Western influences on an already highly constrained civil society.

THE RULING FAMILY

Rahmon’s extended family already controls the most important economic sectors, including major retail, entertainment, air transportation, finance, and media outlets. Other family members serve in high-profile positions in the central or some regional governments. The Rahmon family is rumored to control the country’s largest industrial enterprise, the Tajikistan Aluminum Company (TALCO), which many believe serves as the elites’ private piggy bank. That claim is hard to verify given the company’s nontransparent ownership structure, which includes offshore financial entities in the British Virgin Islands and elsewhere.

However, TALCO is not the cash cow it used to be. Global aluminum prices are down by almost half since 2011, so the company had to lay off workers in 2014. The drop in prices probably dented the Rahmon family pocketbook. This might explain Rahmon’s decision in March 2015 to install his twenty-seven-year-old son as the head of the

country’s anticorruption agency. The appointment could be a part of a long-term succession plan by the president with the hope that his son can keep the Rahmon family at the center of power for years to come. The government reportedly uses the anticorruption agency to target the family’s political opponents and economic rivals and secure the loyalty of security service officials. This targeted misuse of the anticorruption tools is just one reason why Tajikistan ranks 152 out of 175 countries on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index.

Businessmen increasingly fear that the Rahmon regime, determined to hold on to power, is willing to use violence to eliminate potential rivals both at home—as many suspect it did with former deputy defense minister Nazarzoda—and abroad. The exiled Tajik businessman Umarali Quvatov, a former business associate of the Rahmon family and leader of the marginally influential opposition Group 24, was gunned down in Istanbul in March 2015. Quvatov posed no real political threat to the government. His organization, founded by business leaders and former officials dissatisfied with Rahmon’s rule and wanting to promote political and economic reform, had no popular following. The government banned Group 24 in the fall of 2014 for alleged extremism after the organization used social media to call for street protests in the capital. It remains unclear who ordered Quvatov’s assassination. It could have been part of a government operation. Given the close connection between business and organized crime in the region, it also could simply have been the result of a commercial dispute. Nonetheless, the still-mysterious circumstances surrounding his death highlight the lack of transparency—both political and economic—in the country.

MORE INSTABILITY LOOMING?

Tajikistan faces multiple threats to its stability, many of which are homegrown, while others emanate from beyond the country’s borders. Rahmon offers no solutions to these growing problems and instead is trying to cling to power ever more tightly and allow his family to feed at the trough of the presidency for as long as possible.

Rahmon's hold appears strong on the surface, but Tajikistan will face a succession crisis at some point: Rahmon has been running Tajikistan now for twenty-three years. At age sixty-three, he is more than a decade younger than his Uzbek and Kazakh counterparts, but his country is smaller, with institutions that are much weaker than those that exist in either Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan. Tajikistan also still lives with some of the legacies of the civil war, including relatively weak central control over areas of the country that are distant from the capital.

Some of the actions Rahmon is taking domestically—suppressing religious thought not sanctioned by the regime, expending money on symbolic infrastructure projects, and

exacerbating corruption and rent seeking—could actually make his regime more fragile than it already is. Given the violent upheaval in Tajikistan in the 1990s and the violence across the permeable border with Afghanistan in the 2000s, any renewed instability in Tajikistan should be a cause for concern for the international community at large. As the country's economy continues to decline, the political system that Rahmon has established is looking increasingly brittle, although Tajikistan for years has defied predictions of state collapse. The country's current trajectory, however, will do little to ameliorate many of its citizens' harsh socioeconomic plight. An upcoming challenge—the transition to the post-Nazarbayev era—is one of its own making.

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