*Commentary*

# Tajikistan's Perspective on Eurasia

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**Abstract**

In this article, the place of Central Asia, particularly of Tajikistan, in the Eurasian continent has been examined. The slow and confident transfer of engine of the world economy from the West to the East and South increasing the role of the countries located between them. Located between Europe, Russia and South Asia, five Central Asian countries are interested in the development and participation in broader transcontinental trade and transit corridors connecting in all directions. Tajikistan has a unique opportunity to become a hub of trade and transit as it is located at the crossroads of growing ties between South and Central Asia.

**Keywords**

Tajikistan, Central Asia, Eurasia, transport, trade, development, South Asia, Rogun

## Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in the independence of Central Asian Republics (CARs) with different economic potentials. In the early years, the Republic of Tajikistan as a part of Central Asia was engulfed by political instability, which caused losses worth billions of dollars, hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, thereby throwing the development of the country back by 30 years.

The first decade of the young Tajik state was spent on the formation and stabilisation of the political system, consolidation of independence and integration into the world community. Equally important was the solution of border issues and the reassessment the geostrategic position of the country in the region, since it was required by national interests. In the second decade of independence, a certain recovery in the economy was achieved, which served as the basis for the beginning of structural reforms: such as the restructuring and privatisation of enterprises, the reform of the agrarian sector and the implementation of communication projects which were incorporated in the country's development strategy for the years 2007–2015.

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Consequently, implementation of this strategy led to the creation of more than 1,600 manufacturing plants and enterprises, as well as creation of more than a million jobs. As a result, domestic production expanded for some goods and products, including fruits, vegetables and building materials, in particular, for cement. From an importing country, Tajikistan gradually turned into an exporting country.

If in 1999 the poverty level reached 81 per cent, then by 2018 the poverty level in the country has reduced considerably to 30 per cent, which is still a high index.

For more than 30 years, the population of the country has faced an acute shortage of electricity in the autumn–winter period. The country would finally complete the Rogun hydroelectric power station, the world's highest stone-cast dam (335 m), and the launch of its first unit was scheduled for November 2018 and second unit will be launch on April 2019. The station's capacity will be 3.6 (MW) which will make Tajikistan the largest producer of electricity in Central Asia. After the commissioning of the power plant, it would be possible to open a dozen of small and large industrial enterprises in the country and create thousands of new jobs.

At the end of 2016, Tajikistan adopted the second strategic programme for a 15-year period: 'The National Development Strategy 2030', which defines the goals and priorities on long-term development, taking into account the lessons learnt, aspirations and intentions of the country's population, existing resources and opportunities, internal and external factors, forecasts of political and economic world and regional processes.

*The 2030 Strategy defines Tajikistan goals 1* (*Tajikistan's National Development Strategy 2030*, 2016):

- transition from energy independence to efficient use of electricity,
- exit from the communication impasse in order to become a transit country,
- provision of food security and public access to quality nutrition and
- the expansion of productive employment.

Until 2030, Tajikistan plans to increase the country's energy potential from the current 18–45 billion KWh per year, or almost threefold. The country plans to increase the export of environmentally friendly electricity to neighbouring countries to 10 billion KWh through regional transmission lines, including the Central Asia–South Asia (CASA)-1000.

However, the XXI century, with its rapidly changing external development environment, puts new risks and challenges for Tajikistan.

The series of economic crises in 2008 and especially in 2014, when Russia incorporated Crimea from Ukraine into the Russian Federation resulting in Western countries' imposition of sanctions on the main trade, economic and military-political partner of Tajikistan. These sanctions greatly aggravated the country's socio-economic situation due to its close economic ties with Russia.

Russia has, since then, become much less attractive as an economic partner and rather ambiguous as a political partner. Reinforced by increasing isolation from the world economy, confrontation with neighbouring countries and the world community, Russia, like in Soviet times, is threatened with 'century of geopolitical loneliness' (Surkov, 2018).

In order to get rid of the 'loneliness complex', Russia initiated the creation of an integrationist association, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which included Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. In 2015, the membership was formalised. Tajikistan not only did not join this organisation, but according to recent sociological research, the interest of its citizens to join to the EEU falls every year (*Avesta*, 2017).

What does the EEU offer to the Central Asian countries and Tajikistan?

In addition to some short-term benefits, for example, free movement of labour and preferential treatment for migrants, there is nothing new in it also, much less progressive. In fact, the model built in the EEU is more like a 'marriage for convenience', an association where the principle of 'against whom' is more important than 'with whom'.

The two Central Asian countries, namely Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan of the EEU, did not receive the benefits of uniting their markets with Russia, which they hoped for and moreover faced a number of problems from joining this organisation, which they clearly did not foresee:

1. international sanctions against Russia and
2. overlap of cheap export and re-export channel from China to other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries.

Moreover, before Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU, Russia promised to finance the construction of a hydroelectric power station, which was of great importance in terms of Kyrgyzstan's energy security, but did not fulfil its promise.

Taken together, all this led to the growth of anti-Russian sentiments among the national elites in these two Central Asian countries—members of EEU—and as a result, increasingly there are calls to withdraw from economic union with Russia.

Given this circumstance, it can be assumed that the EEU in such an unsatisfactory format will not last long and will rather be reformatted or lose its significance. But it is quite possible that the necessary positive conditions could be formed in the medium term—in 5–7 years. On the other hand, there is high probability Russia's economic weakness will continue. In this case, an association such as the EEU possibly will not emerge as a coherent or an effective organisation. In such a scenario, the CARs will not be under Russian pressure and pursue an independent foreign policy. Most likely, there will be a transformation to another functional plane and Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan need to focus on globalisation and discover global markets (Kaliyev, 2018).

On the other hand, the flow of Chinese investment is also not guaranteed for decades to come. Impressive are the volumes and growth rates of Chinese investment. About 40 per cent of Tajikistan's external debt falls on China. In its borrowing structure, China occupies an absolutely dominant position. China's economic expansion may have a favourable impact on the prospects for regional integration, although as such the idea of Central Asian integration is not the goal of Chinese interests in the region. Its possible consequences are in full agreement with them. Thus, the implementation of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) project ensures the elimination of trade and investment barriers between all project participants

(Kuchins, 2015). It also envisages the creation of large logistics and trade hubs, which could lead to the integration of the region. It cannot be denied that, in the region, a competition of Russian and Chinese interests is likely to emerge and in Tajikistan, Russia has started losing to China in terms of economic investments, trade and so on, since 2016.

## The Afghan Factor

On the road to realisation of concrete projects for the development of Tajikistan, the Afghan factor and the ethnopolitical discord existing in the region create obstacles. Some of the factors that impact are the unstable social and political situation in neighbouring Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA). Tajikistan, located in the centre of Eurasian communications, is not only away from the main trade routes but also found itself in transport isolation because of the politics of another neighbour—Republic of Uzbekistan.

However, despite this daunting scenario, it will not have a decisive influence on the level of interest in Tajikistan and, accordingly, the competition between the geopolitical players, both worldwide and regional, will continue. Tajikistan will have to draw up a strategy on the likely opportunities that could come its way.

For before 1999, security in Tajikistan was understood exclusively as the cessation of the civil war, providing protection against the spread of the destabilising impact of Afghan conflict. At present, it is the threat of terrorism and organised crime, political and religious extremism, separatism, interethnic conflicts, information wars and illegal trafficking in weapons and drugs, which are the most potent threats to the country.

At present, these non-traditional threats constitute a real threat to stability and security not only for Tajikistan but also for the entire world community as demonstrated by the devastating attack on USA. These forces continue to threaten international and national security of countries and are transnational and transboundary in nature.

Despite political instability and the continuing civil confrontation, Afghanistan, which has been one of the key hubs of transport and trade for all of Asia, is gaining new momentum of economic development every year. The fact that Tajikistan provides Afghanistan with electricity, consumer goods, industrial products, etc., could be the key to the effective development of Tajikistan. Unfortunately, the realities are such that this potential is practically not used.

The implementation of specific development projects in Tajikistan is to an extent dependent on the Afghan factor and existing ethnic and political problems in the region. Though Tajikistan located in the center of Eurasian communications, nevertheless the unstable socio-political situation in Afghanistan not only removes Tajikistan from the main trade routes, but also isolates the existing potential. The transport blockade imposed by Uzbekistan also impacted negatively on Tajikistan. After the assumption of presidency by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, relations between the countries have improved, and this issue is already in the past. Now the political situation in the north of Afghanistan suits this communication blockade.

Tajikistan's security is directly linked to Afghanistan, as the two countries share the longest border of all the countries of Central Asia—1,344 km. In the border with Tajikistan in the north-eastern and western provinces of Afghanistan, there is a large Tajik diaspora (according to various estimates, from 10 to 15 million people or 35–40 per cent of the total population of Afghanistan), which is one of the largest ethnic group after the Pashtuns. In addition, Tajikistan has close economic ties with Afghanistan, which accounts for 92 per cent of all Tajik electricity exports.

Nevertheless, Tajikistan offers Central and South Asia, as a subregion of Eurasia, the implementation of a number of projects, including:

1. Construction of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Tajikistan (TAT) railway line. The construction of the TAT railway, the total cost of which is about US$2 billion, was opened in June 2013, linking Central Asia to the world markets, giving them a shortcut to the Indian Ocean.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates that if basic improvements were to be made to the transportation infrastructure connecting Central Asia to Afghanistan, the overall trade would increase by up to US$12 billion, a growth of 80 per cent. Another study by ADB reveals that completing new roads would boost total trade among Afghanistan's neighbours by 160 per cent, increasing the transit trade through Afghanistan by 113 per cent (Shoaib, 2016).

Meanwhile, the government of Turkmenistan has not approved the protocol signed by Tajikistan and Afghanistan on the further implementation of the project on the construction of the TAT railway. Tajik and Afghan sides signed this protocol back in 2014, after which it was sent to the Government of Turkmenistan for consideration.

Previously, there were controversial points about the choice of the route of this road through the territory of Afghanistan. Two routes were proposed. The length of the short route that Tajikistan offered is 160 km and will cost US$2,378 million. The route proposed by the Afghan side was more than 500 km. As a result, the parties managed to agree and sign the relevant protocol, sending it to the government of Turkmenistan for signing.

The construction of the Tajik–Afghan section in connection with the situation on Afghan territory was also questioned: the ADB, which previously undertook financing for the construction of the Afghan section of this road, has presumably suspended the project's support because of the tense situation in the neighbouring country.

Earlier, ADB allocated US$9 million of grant funds for the development of a feasibility study for the future railway.

—A gas pipeline along this route;
—Acceleration of the construction of the power project CASA-1000 and Rogun–Mazar-i-Sharif–Herat–Mashhad power lines, which could connect with the grid networks of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Rogun hydropower plant is not only of national but also of the regional importance. After the construction of this important hydropower facility, in the future, as an exporter of cheap and environmentally friendly electricity, Tajikistan will be able to provide electricity to Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Thus, Tajikistan will have its own 'Energy Silk Road'.

All these projects could seriously contribute to the development of northern Afghanistan, help to strengthening regional cooperation and thereby ensure security throughout Eurasia.

But, in order to implement these projects faster, some ambitious plans in the form of Strategy 2030 are not enough. Tajikistan needs to direct its resources not only to the traditional 'northern route', in other words, close integration with the former Soviet countries, in the form of joining the EEU, but it is also need to integrate more closely with the South, given that the engine of the world economy has quietly shifted to the South. So here, Tajikistan, as a country in the centre of Eurasia, offers a wonderful opportunity to bind both South and Central Asia within the framework of cooperation. How? The answer lies in the cornerstone of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.

Let us try to do a little retrospective analysis of the state of bilateral economic cooperation between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

If an analysis is any indicator such as trade turnover, then its status in the first years of the 1990s amounted to US$105 million and grew to US$445 million until 1999, after which there was an annual decline that peaked at 2015 at the level of US$12 million. Thus, during this period, turnover decreased by 37 times (*TAJSTAT*, 2016). At the current level of bilateral relations, trade reached to about US$500 million.

There has been a huge change after President Mirziyoyev assumed the office of the president, in 2016. Importantly, there has been a warming of relations between neighbours and in the same year the trade turnover increased from US$12 to about 70 million, and in 2017, this figure reached the level of US$126 million. Thus, literally in 2 years, the trade turnover increased by 10.5 times or by 953 per cent.

In Tajikistan, it is said that: 'The close neighbor is better than a distant relative'. During the March 2018 state visit of President Mirziyoyev to Tajikistan, a number of important agreements for the neighbouring countries were signed, including a significant facilitation of the visa regime, the commencement of the supply of Tajik electricity to Uzbekistan and the restoration of all railway lines and checkpoints connecting our people and our countries.

People-to-people contacts gave a new impetus to bilateral relations and if they are fully implemented and come into force in the same year, then by the end of 2018–2019, we expect that the volume of trade will grow to US$300 million and US$500 million, respectively.

Currently, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are part of the Free Trade Area (FTA) of the CIS which was signed in October 2011 in St. Petersburg, Russia. At this moment, both countries are going through the first stage of integration, and it is necessary that the duty-free trade regime between the countries is fully evolved in the next 3–5 years.

On the other hand, integration processes are underway in the region under the name of the EEU, which are at the stage of development higher than the FTA. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are not part of this integration association.

It is difficult to remember from the history whether there have been an integration association involving only two states, but Afghanistan could be connected here.

If we take the Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, we can see that such an analogue under the name of BENELUX, with the participation of three countries Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. BENELUX as an economic union had existed at the time when in 1957, the other six countries of Europe signed the Treaty of Rome, which established the European Union.

Based on this, after 2020, Tajikistan should consider creating a similar integration initiative with the participation of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, starting with the free trade zone and gradually bringing the level of economic integration to the customs union.

Only this kind of initiative will allow to fully tap the full potential of economic cooperation between countries and at the same time, make a salutary contribution to the solution of the 'Afghan problem', where a large number of Tajiks and Uzbeks live.

The realisation of this project is not easy. Without going into details, the following can be noted:

First, it is worth to consider the political will of Russia, on which Tajikistan is still dependent, though much less than in the early 2000s. Russia is by no means interested in losing Tajikistan as its sphere of influence and its southern border.

Second, this is the situation in Afghanistan itself, especially in the northern part, where the majority of ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks are located. The infringement of their rights and the constant fighting of Afghan forces in the northern part of this country are perceived by the authorities of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as an infringement of the rights of their ethnic peoples.

Third, it considers the political will of Uzbekistan to integrate with the South, which has the shortest frontier of only 114 km.

And last but not the least is the financial aspects for its implementation, which, as we have already pointed out earlier, requires over US$2 billion. However, a step-by-step resolution of each of them could see the fulfilment of such an initiative. It may open a 'window of opportunity' for the whole Eurasia, after which Tajikistan will have a chance to make a serious breakthrough in the path of sustainable development.

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