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**Security Policy in the  
Context of the  
“New Silk Road”:  
The Case of Tajikistan**

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# SECURITY POLICY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE “NEW SILK ROAD”

## THE CASE OF TAJIKISTAN

China’s move to consolidate its position in Central Asia is often considered in the context of the country’s global One Belt, One Road (or New Silk Road) logistics project. As part of this plan, the People’s Republic wants to construct a transit corridor through the whole of Europe and Asia, as well as the “maritime Silk Road of the 21st century”. China’s expansion in Central Asia is currently conditioned by chaotic circumstances around the world, including the COVID-19 pandemic and a growing geopolitical rivalry between major powers. Notwithstanding all of this and despite a recession in its domestic economy, China persists in expanding its presence in Central Asia. On the one hand, this is changing the landscape of the continent and boosting the economies of Central Asian countries, but on the other it is giving rise to new tensions in the economies, international relations, security policy, and domestic politics of the countries in the region.

Chinese investments, pipelines, and infrastructure projects worth billions are on everyone’s lips. Yet China’s overarching strategies for intervening in Central Asia often go unnoticed in all of this, as does the range of actors involved and the different ways China is increasing its presence on the ground, including in the security sector. What is underway in the Republic of Tajikistan, a country that plays a crucial role for the security of Central Asia, is particularly intriguing, since it is a clear example of China’s increasing focus on securing its projects within the newly emergent economic community.

Even before it had gone public with its plans for the New Silk Road project, China was taking steps to increase its involvement in Tajikistan. Since the opening of the Sino–Tajik transport route through the Kulma Pass in 2004 and the signing of the Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation in 2007, Tajik–Chinese relations have experienced an unprecedented boost, especially in the sector of transport infrastructure. The largest and most important Chinese transport projects in Tajikistan include the construction of the Ozodi Tunnel (Shar Shar Pass, US\$40 million), the renovation of the Dushanbe–Chanak highway (with a Chinese loan of US\$281

million), the construction of the Dangara–Kangurt highway (US\$256 million) and the modernisation of the main Dushanbe–Tursunzoda–Uzbekistan highway, which the China Road and Bridge Corporation was awarded the contract for.

As early as 2013, China had already become Tajikistan’s most important economic and strategic ally, with the relationship being cemented in a joint declaration of strategic partnership. In autumn of the same year, Chinese President Xi Jinping presented the proposal for the New Silk Road. Two years later in Beijing, Tajikistan became the first country in the world to sign a cooperation agreement with China within the framework of the “Silk Road Economic Belt”, a “treaty outlining joint steps for the practical implementation of the president of the People’s Republic of China’s initiative on the development of infrastructure networks and on common goals for economic growth within the New Silk Road project”. Since then, an extensive legal framework has been created in Tajikistan that is intended to harmonise legislation and the applicable “rules of the game” in both countries. It will be updated as bilateral relations develop. In June 2019, Tajikistan and China signed 18 documents outlining plans for cooperation as part of the New Silk Road, which attests to the further strengthening of bilateral cooperation in the traditional sectors of agriculture, non-ferrous metallurgy, and counter-terrorism. The two countries also pledged to establish joint ventures and an investment working group.

On 13 June 2019, the Xinhua news agency stressed that Tajikistan and the People’s Republic had gone to great lengths to ensure that the “One Belt, One Road” initiative aligned with the Tajik National Development Strategy 2030. Considerable progress was made in the sectors of infrastructure, energy, raw material extraction, petrochemicals, information and communication, construction and building materials, as well as agriculture and the processing of agricultural products.<sup>1</sup> The prospects for Tajik participation in the New Silk Road were also defined, including continuing to coordinate the project with the Tajik National Development Strategy 2030 and efficient customs regula-

1 Obzor, “Kitaj i Tadžikistan razvivajut dobrososedstvo, družbu, partnerstvo i bratstvo na vysokom urovne (Outlook: China and Tajikistan maintain good neighborly relations, friendship, partnership and fraternity at a high level)”, *Xinhua*, 13 June 2019, [http://russian.news.cn/2019-06/13/c\\_138140330.htm](http://russian.news.cn/2019-06/13/c_138140330.htm).

tions to facilitate the expansion of bilateral trade. For their part, China made a commitment to encourage Chinese businesspeople to invest in Tajikistan and establish new enterprises that would accelerate the industrialisation of the partner country. Both sides also agreed to further increase their cooperation in the sectors of hydropower, culture, tourism, logistics,

pharmaceuticals, rural development, and water purification.<sup>2</sup>

The implementation of these plans has partially been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, but Beijing continues to place strong emphasis on the “One Belt, One Road” projects in Tajikistan despite the economic slowdown in China.

## 1 SECURITY IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE “ONE BELT, ONE ROAD” INITIATIVE

China signalled its interest in securitising the region as early as 1996–97 in the Shanghai Five group’s (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) Treaty on Deepening Military Trust and in the Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Armed Forces in Border Regions.<sup>3</sup> The Shanghai Five later developed into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). In 2001, the SCO approved the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism. This document states that dealing with security issues is one of the core tasks of the SCO. At that time, China placed particular emphasis on cooperation with Moscow to handle matters of regional security. This was especially the case in the context of the “Uyghur question” and the “Afghanistan question”. Tajikistan was to act as a kind of buffer zone between Xinjiang (Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang of the PRC) and Afghanistan and protect China from the potential threat of terrorist and extremist forces entering the country illegally.<sup>4</sup> At that point in time, the distribution of tasks in the region for the next ten year was determined: while China took a leading role in fostering the economies of the Central Asian nations, Russia was responsible for their security.

However, considerable changes have been made to this agenda in recent years. While Russia has become less relevant in terms of security policy, in part due to a lack of financial resources, Beijing has abruptly ramped up its military activities. As of now, China intends to take security in the Pax Sinica region (the emerging economic community dominated by China) into its own hands. 3,000 Chinese soldiers are part of the United Nations peacekeeping force, a Chinese military base has been established in Djibouti,<sup>5</sup> and parallel to

this, Beijing has increased its military-technical cooperation with Central Asian states, primarily Tajikistan. Since security issues are central to the Tajik–Chinese agenda, Chinese security agencies cooperate much more closely with their Tajik partner authorities than with their counterparts in other countries in the region. Chinese analyst Shen Xiu is convinced that Tajikistan is crucial for establishing China’s national security and for the implementation of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative.<sup>6</sup> On a geopolitical level, not only is Tajikistan relevant for China’s security, it also offers China the opportunity to intervene more effectively in world affairs. Last but not least, Tajikistan still maintains contacts with Tajik elites in Afghanistan and could significantly influence the situation there. China’s concerns about the increase in Western activities in Central Asia are also at play. Experts speak of a possible destabilisation of Tajikistan and the whole region against the backdrop of the escalating conflict with the US. Tajikistan also became more important for China as relations between China and India deteriorated, as well as in the complex game between China and Iran, another country that is in many ways essential to the New Silk Road project. For Beijing, Tajikistan and Central Asia as a whole play an important strategic role both for its own national security and in the current geopolitical conflict between world powers. Moreover, Tajikistan represents a geopolitical interface for the integration of the Eurasian Economic Union into the New Silk Road Initiative. It is here that China’s main goal with regard to Central Asia lies, namely in implementing a free trade zone for commerce with Central Asian countries and later with the whole of Europe and Asia.

2 Ibid.

3 The Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions was signed by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 1996. In 1997, the same states signed the Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions at a summit meeting in Moscow.

4 Roque, J., “China invests in Central Asia stability through Tajikistan”, *China Briefing*, 22 May 2008, [www.china-briefing.com/news/china-reconnects-with-tajikistan](http://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-reconnects-with-tajikistan).

5 Umarov, T., “Na puti k Pax Sinica: Čto neset Central’noj Azii èkspansija Kitaja? (Towards the Pax Sinica: What are the consequences of Chinese expansion for Central Asia?)”, 25 March 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81265>.

6 Panfilova, V., “Kitajcy vyšli na ochranu tadžiksko-afganskoj granicy (The Chinese are now protecting the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan)”, *Nezavisimaja gazeta*, 30 July 2019, [www.ng.ru/cis/2019-07-30/1\\_7636\\_border.html](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2019-07-30/1_7636_border.html).

Tajikistan's increasing economic dependence on China manifests itself in all areas of the country's political system, including foreign policy. Observers point out that Tajikistan always unconditionally follows the Chinese position in votes at the United Nations.<sup>7</sup> In the last six years, cooperation between the Tajik and Chinese military authorities has also increased,<sup>8</sup> with the intelligence and homeland security agencies of the two countries collaborating especially frequently. Tajik and Chinese security agencies work closely

together to combat the "three evils" (terrorism, separatism and extremism) as well as drug trafficking and international organised crime. Cooperation between the countries' respective border authorities and the interior ministries is increasing, and mechanisms for jointly combating terrorist threats are coming into effect. In 2013, the Chinese company Huawei introduced the Safe City (Shahri Bekhatar) system in Tajikistan, which was modernised with the help of AI technologies in 2019.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 CHALLENGES AND RISKS FOR TAJIKISTAN

### 2.1 THE DEBT BURDEN

Tajik experts are increasingly concerned about the country's substantial national debt, which amounted to US\$3.243 billion as of February 2021.<sup>10</sup> The country's largest lender is China; Tajikistan owes the Export-Import Bank of China (China Exim Bank) 36.6 percent of its total external debt, or more than US\$1 billion.<sup>11</sup> Tajikistan also has debts with the World Bank (US\$338.5 million), the Asian Development Bank (US\$287.3 million) and the Islamic Development Bank (US\$131.9 million); it also has Eurobond obligations amounting to US\$500 million.<sup>12</sup> Tajikistan is already finding it increasingly difficult to service its debts. But it is no secret that China does not usually write off debts. According to Shen Xiu, the governments of Tajikistan and other Central Asian republics have made several requests for restructuring programmes or for a partial write-off of their debts. In the last five to six years, Cameroon is the only country that has had its debt forgiven by China under the One Belt, One Road initiative, and that was due to exceptional circumstances.<sup>13</sup> As for Tajikistan, a precedent was set when two gold mines, Duobai Sharqi and Kumargi Bolo, were transferred to the Chinese

company TBEA to settle debts of US\$331.5 million owed to China Exim Bank, which had been borrowed for the construction of the Dushanbe 2 thermal power plant.<sup>14</sup> In an interview for the Chinese website STCN, Zhijin Chen, the head of TBEA, stated that "the Tajik government will provide TBEA with more mines if the company cannot recover the investments made from these two sites".

Tajikistan is currently unable to repay its foreign debt due to the 2020 recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A further result of this was a decrease in remittances sent home by migrant workers. According to the December 2020 World Bank report *Tajikistan: Economic Slowdown Amid the Pandemic*, the decline in labour migration and remittances from abroad had a negative impact on the Tajik economy. Economic growth in 2020 over a ten-month period was as low as 4.2 percent compared to 7.2 percent in the previous year. For this reason, Tajikistan joined the list of countries that submitted requests to have their debts temporarily suspended as part of the G20's Debt Service Suspension Initiative. "The aim of the initiative is to support low-income countries by officially suspending their debt service and bilateral debt repayment obligations until mid-2021."<sup>15</sup> As a

7 "Kak Tadžikistan prevraščajetsja v zonu osobych interesov Kitaja (How Tajikistan is turning into a special Chinese interest zone)", *Central Asian Analytical Network*, 1 January 2021, <https://caa-network.org/archives/21363>.

8 Panfilova, V., "Kitajcy vyšli na ochranu tadžiksko-afganskoj granicy (The Chinese are now protecting the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan)", *Nezavisimaja gazeta*, 30 July 2019, [www.ng.ru/cis/2019-07-30/1\\_7636\\_border.html](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2019-07-30/1_7636_border.html).

9 Umarov, T., "Na puti k Pax Sinica: Čto neset Central'noj Azii ěkspansija Kitaja? (Towards the Pax Sinica: What are the consequences of Chinese expansion for Central Asia?)", 25 March 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81265>.

10 "Ministr finansov Tadžikistana zajavil, čto v predstojaščie tri goda strana ne planiruet brat' kredity u Kitaja, a kritika o nepomernych dolgach Dušanbe pered Pekinom bespočvenna (Tajikistan's finance minister says the country has no plans to take out new Chinese loans in the next three years and that statements about Dushanbe's exorbitant debt to Beijing are unfounded)", *Ozodi*, 13 February 2020, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30431950.html>.

11 "Tadžikistan prosit otsročki po starym kreditam i odnovenno prosit novye (Tajikistan asks for deferment of old loans and wants to take out new ones at the same time)", *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, 26 January 2021, <https://cabar.asia/ru/tadzhikistan-prosit-otsrochki-po-starym-kreditam-i-odnovenno-prosit-novye>.

12 Ibid. Eurobonds are promissory notes issued in foreign currency [translator's note].

13 Panfilova, V., "Kitajcy vyšli na ochranu tadžiksko-afganskoj granicy (The Chinese are now protecting the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan)", *Nezavisimaja gazeta*, 30 July 2019, [www.ng.ru/cis/2019-07-30/1\\_7636\\_border.html](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2019-07-30/1_7636_border.html).

14 Proven gold reserves in the Duobai Sharqi and Kumargi Bolo mines alone, which were transferred to TBEA, amount to 51.7 tonnes and suspected total reserves amount to 117.16 tonnes. China already owns more than 80 percent of all mines for the extraction of gold, rare earth metals and gemstones in Tajikistan, including the largest mines Zarafshon in Sughd Province and Pakrut near Dushanbe.

15 "World Bank: Tadžikistan: zamedlenie na fone pandemii (Tajikistan: Economic Slowdown Amid the pandemic)", 2020, [www.vsemirnyjbank.org/ru/country/tajikistan/publication/economic-update-fall-2020](http://www.vsemirnyjbank.org/ru/country/tajikistan/publication/economic-update-fall-2020).

part of this program, China suspended the collection of debt payments from 77 countries, including Tajikistan, until mid-2021.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, in 2020, the country provided more aid to Tajikistan than any other donor; 40 percent of all pandemic relief shipments came from China.

Some Tajik economists argue that the country will be unable to service its foreign debt in 2021 as well. Others, for example Khojimukhammad Umarov, predict that Tajikistan will not be able to make the payments before the second half of 2021.<sup>17</sup> It is worth mentioning that in 2021 Tajikistan will have to pay US\$213.5 million in repayments and interest on its external debt; in 2022 it will be US\$238.2 million and in 2023 it will be as much as US\$243.3 million.<sup>18</sup>

After the World Bank report was released, a discussion about the foreign debt and the likelihood of a sovereign default flared up in the Tajik media. On 19 January 2021, the Ministry of Finance stated that the situation was by no means catastrophic and that the payments were temporarily suspended merely to focus efforts on fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Ministry of Finance, “the suspension of debt service payments freed up additional funds which were used to finance the country’s health sector”.<sup>19</sup> In February, the finance minister stated that the country had no plans to take out new Chinese loans in the coming years and that criticism of loans being taken out from the People’s Republic was unfounded.

Nevertheless, the media continue to speculate about how Tajikistan will repay its debts and especially how it will pay off its biggest lender, China. Some experts fear that the country will be forced to relinquish not only supplies of raw materials, majority shares in strategically important enterprises and control over transport routes, but also Tajik territories to China.

## 2.2 THE ECONOMIC INFLUENCE OF BEIJING

President Xi Jinping has made it clear that he intends to continue supporting development in Tajikistan. While the country has received fewer government

loans in recent years, Chinese companies have increased their investments (sometimes in the form of joint ventures) in sectors such as mining (of gold, silver and polymetallic ores), cement production, textiles and agriculture. According to Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, as of April 2019, China’s total investments in Tajikistan amounted to over US\$2 billion, which makes up 47.3 percent of all foreign investment in the country.<sup>20</sup> Today, there are more than 300 Chinese enterprises with various legal structures operating in Tajikistan, including state-owned enterprises, joint-stock companies, and private companies which are primarily active in transport, energy infrastructure, mining, gas pipeline construction, agricultural production and processing, and construction materials production. The China National Petroleum Corporation is without a doubt the largest of these, with several projects currently underway in Tajikistan. Other major Chinese companies active in Tajikistan include China Nonferrous Metal International Mining Group, Zijin Mining Group, and TBEA.

Chinese investment has led to a sharp increase in exports in certain sectors. For example, while only 2.4 tonnes of gold were extracted in Tajikistan in 2012, by 2019 this figure had risen to 8.1 tonnes. And while Tajikistan produced only 30,000 tonnes of cement in 2013 and imported around three million tonnes, in 2019 4.2 million tonnes were produced domestically.<sup>21</sup> Tajikistan has become Central Asia’s largest exporter of high-quality cement. At the same time relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have improved, so that Uzbekistan now buys Tajik cement. Silver production also increased by 17 percent in 2019.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to loans and direct investment, China also provides financial assistance to Tajikistan without receiving any direct compensation. By and large, Beijing is pursuing a long-term strategy in Tajikistan, which involves not only the central government and the provincial governments of Hubei and Henan, but also numerous large and small companies, including private ones.

16 “Kitaj priostanovil priem platežej po obsluživaniju dolg (China stops accepting debt service payments)”, *Sputnik*, 5 August 2020, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/economy/20200805/1031686415/tajikistan-dolg-china.html>.

17 “Tadžikistan prosit otsročki po starym kreditam i odnovenno prosit novye (Tajikistan asks for deferment of old loans and wants to take out new ones at the same time)”, *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, 26 January 2021, <https://cabar.asia/ru/tadzjikistan-prosit-otsrochki-po-starym-kreditam-i-odnovenno-prosit-novyje>.

18 “World Bank: Tadžikistan: zamedlenie na fone pandemii (Tajikistan: Economic Slowdown Amid the pandemic)”, 2020, [www.vsemirnyjbank.org/ru/country/tajikistan/publication/economic-update-fall-2020](http://www.vsemirnyjbank.org/ru/country/tajikistan/publication/economic-update-fall-2020)

19 “Ministr finansov Tadžikistana zajavil, čto v predstojaščie tri goda strana ne planiruet brat’ kredity u Kitaja, a kritika o nepomernych dolgach Dušanbe pored Pekinom bespočevna (Tajikistan’s finance minister says the country has no plans to take out new Chinese loans in the next three years and that statements about Dushanbe’s exorbitant debt to Beijing are unfounded)”, *Ozodi*, 13 February 2020, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30431950.html>.

20 Statistical Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, “Statističeskij ežegodnik Respubliki Tadžikistan (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Tajikistan)”, Dushanbe 2020, p. 266.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 293

22 van der Kley, D., “Kitaj menjaet strategiju v Central’noj Azii (China changes its strategy in Central Asia)”, *Eurasianet*, 26 November 2020, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1606413540>.

### 2.3 THE RISKS FOR TAJIKISTAN POSED BY CHINA'S ECONOMIC EXPANSION

While maintaining informal relations with Tajikistan's ruling elites helps Beijing advance its interests, this can also encourage corruption. It is no secret that Chinese actors often pay bribes to obtain licences to mine raw materials and precious metals, to be exempted from taxes and tariffs, or to lease irrigation land for free in Central Asia, as well as in Africa and Latin America.

Chinese expansion is changing agrarian structures, property relations pertaining to agricultural land, as well as labour relations in Tajik agriculture, all of which are leading to a transition to agrarian capitalism. More and more Chinese farmers, agricultural enterprises, and other ventures from various Chinese cities are active in the Tajik agricultural sector. They have leased hundreds of thousands of hectares of irrigated land at concessional rates for 49 years. A rise in the trend of land grabbing has increasingly forced the *Dekhan* (Tajik small farmers) to seek work abroad. Drawing on their own experience as well as on support from the Chinese government, Chinese companies produce agricultural products for the Tajik domestic market and for export to other Central Asian countries and Russia. Their ultimate aim is to control production chains and foster production in China. One part of this strategy includes the import of seeds, agricultural machinery, mineral fertilisers, and pesticides from China to Tajikistan. It is obvious that this poses risks for different segments of the agricultural sector in Tajikistan, above all because Chinese agrarian capitalism will not tolerate the existing agricultural structures present in Tajikistan, which are characterised by migration, subsistence farming, and large land holdings. There is a considerable risk that land conflicts could erupt in a country marked by massive land shortages, rural overpopulation, and unemployment. China's territorial claims over Tajikistan are arguably an even more serious concern. It is not uncommon to find articles in the Chinese media suggesting that part of the country (Mountain Badakhshan) or even the entire Tajik territory is historically Chinese and that the impoverished population of Tajikistan would be better off as part of the People's Republic anyway.<sup>23</sup> Most recently, drama over territories erupted in July

2020, when an article appeared under the title "Tajikistan initiates restitution of Chinese territories and the lost Pamir Mountains return to their true owner". The article discussed the handover of 1,158 square kilometres of land to China, which took place in 2011 in exchange for financial aid.<sup>24</sup> The Tajik Ministry of the Interior submitted a formal note of protest to the Chinese government against this kind of publication. The foreign minister of Tajikistan, Siro Jiddin Muhriddin, was able to have the article removed from the website after discussions with his Chinese colleagues.<sup>25</sup> However, in January of this year, Chinese media again published articles about China's territorial claims, this time concerning the whole of Tajikistan. For example, on 3 January 2021, the Chinese website *Flower - Reflection of History* published an article entitled "What are the origins of Tajikistan and its 9.28 million inhabitants?", which claimed that "Tajikistan has always been a part of China".<sup>26</sup>

### 2.4 SINOPHOBIA ON THE RISE

The relationship of the Tajik people to China and its people is very contradictory and contrasts significantly with the sentiments in neighbouring Central Asian countries. A strong pro-China lobby has developed in government and business circles. The general public is largely interested in developing a friendly relationship with China. Although frightening reports keep appearing in the media, Tajik society at large feels less fear and more curiosity towards China than its Central Asian neighbours.

The population still earns more from labour migration to Russia than, for example, from the growth of industry and the service sector as part of the New Silk Road. The general public is aware that it is mainly the elites who benefit from cooperation with China. In addition to this, people are also dissatisfied with the corruption arising from the Chinese projects and with the way Chinese farmers receive favourable treatment compared to the Tajik *Dekhan*. In some—albeit very rare—cases, there have been protests by desperate Tajik workers against poor working conditions and discriminatory pay.<sup>27</sup>

The results of a 2018 nationwide opinion poll by the Sharq polling institute showed that only six percent

23 Arabova, N., "'Vernut' Pamir': tadžikskie zemli opjat' pod pricelom Kitaja ('Taking back the Pamir': Tajik territories targeted by China again)", *ia-centr.ru*, 22 February 2021, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1614000420>.

24 Muchammadi, F., "'Tadžikistan vsegda byl čast'ju Kitaja'? Kitajskie SMI vernulis' k teme territorial'nych pretenzij k sosedsjam ('Has Tajikistan always been a part of China'? Chinese media again make territorial claims over their neighbours)", *rus.ozodi.org*, 19 January 2021, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1611004740>.

25 "Kitaj i Tadžikistan čut' ne porugalis' iz-za stat'iv SMI: čem vse zakončilos' (China and Tajikistan almost fought over a press article: how it all went down)", *Sputnik*, 15 February 2021, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20210215/china-tajikistan-statia-smi-1032830259.html>.

26 Arabova, N., "'Vernut' Pamir': tadžikskie zemli opjat' pod pricelom Kitaja ('Taking back the Pamir': Tajik territories targeted by China again)", *ia-centr.ru*, 22 February 2021, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1614000420>.

27 "Tadžikskie rabočie zolotych rudnikov 'Pokruda' pytajutsja buntovat' protiv svoich kitajskich chozjaev (Tajik miners at the Pakrut gold mine try to rebel against their Chinese bosses)", *Ozodi*, 18 February 2021, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=161359620>.

of respondents thought China was Tajikistan's closest ally; for 59 percent it was Russia and for 11 percent Iran. At the same time, people do not see China as a threat to Tajikistan's security and stability. But while in 2008 only three percent of respondents had concerns about China's influence, by 2018 this number had risen to 12 percent. In recent years, fears of territorial losses and even loss of sovereignty have been on the rise in Tajikistan.

## 2.5 THE THREAT OF THE PANDEMIC

At the end of January 2020, traffic between Tajikistan and China was suspended due to the spread of a new infectious disease in China. Some foreigners, including Chinese nationals, were flown out of Tajikistan. The Tajik Food Safety Committee banned the import of all food from China—although the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade acknowledged that Chinese goods continued to enter Tajikistan via other countries.

Broadly speaking, there is little fear of COVID-19 or other epidemics in Tajikistan. In the years since independence, Tajikistan has experienced a bloody civil war as well as typhoid, diphtheria, malaria, and tuberculosis epidemics. Despite considerable problems in the health sector, the country proved to be fairly resilient in coping with infectious diseases, which are mainly brought in from Afghanistan. Therefore, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic which spread from China was as stoic as the handling of other infec-

tious diseases, and the population and health professionals took the usual disease control measures.

Tajikistan was one of the last countries in the world to recognise the existence of the COVID-19 virus, having only done so at the end of April 2020. According to official figures, 90 people have died of COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic, and a total of only 13,000 cases of infection have been reported.<sup>28</sup> No new cases have been detected since 30 December 2020, prompting President Rahmon to declare that the disease had been defeated in his annual address to parliament. He announced that in 2020, the Tajik government had allocated over US\$ 145 million in additional funds to the national health system to fight the epidemic.<sup>29</sup>

Official statistics certainly do not provide a complete picture of the spread of coronavirus in Tajikistan. Nevertheless, it should be noted that both infection rates and mortality were low and that the protective measures implemented did not unduly burden the economy. The closure of the Russian labour market to migrants from Tajikistan were a much bigger blow to the economy and the income of the population.

Chinese professionals have been returning to Tajikistan since August 2020. The first flight back to Tajikistan from Wuhan brought 138 Chinese workers who were employed in the cement factories owned by the Huaxin Cement company from Hubei province.<sup>30</sup> Chinese employees working for gold mining companies and Chinese professionals involved in the construction of parliament and government buildings in Tajikistan have also returned.

## 3 THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: CHINA TAKES RUSSIA'S PLACE

### 3.1 MILITARY COOPERATION BETWEEN TAJIKISTAN AND CHINA

Tajikistan and China cooperate on security issues both bilaterally and within the framework of the SCO. Over the last two years, the Chinese military has been particularly active. The cooperation between the two countries involves several areas:

1. China finances the work of Tajik security agencies, and in recent years has increased the amount

of funding to this end dramatically. In 2016, for example, Beijing granted funding to secure the Tajik–Afghan border, which resulted in the construction of several entities (three command posts, four observation towers, four border checkpoints and a military training centre). China equips these facilities and pays their operating costs, while Tajik soldiers are stationed here. Joint border patrols have also been underway since September 2016.<sup>31</sup> China also committed to renovate 30 to 40 border guard stations on the Tajik

28 COVID-19 statistics in Tajikistan, as of 26 February 2021, <https://index.minfin.com.ua/reference/coronavirus/geography/tajikistan>.

29 Islamova, L., "Rachmon zajavil o pobeде nad koronavirusom v Tadžikistane (Rachmon declares the coronavirus defeated in Tajikistan)", *RIA Novosti*, 26 January 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210126/koronavirus-1594584637.html>.

30 Jau Cz Jan, "Kitaj v Central'noj Azii: tak čej že éto vse-taki 'Pojas i put' (China in Central Asia: Who actually owns 'One Belt, One Road?')", *Eurasianet*, 11 September 2020, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1599826800>.

31 Juldašev, A., "Kitaj pomožet usilit' tadžiksko-afganskiju granicu (China provides assistance in securing the Tajik-Afghan border)", *Asia-Plus*, 10 July 2017, <https://asiaplustj.info/news/tajikistan/security/201711007/kitaj-pomozhet-usilit-tadžiksko-afganskuyu-granitsu-čego-on-boitsya>.

side of the border with Afghanistan. China also supplies military equipment to Tajik combat units. Finally, a centre to combat terrorism, extremism and separatism was opened in Tajikistan in 2018 with Chinese support.<sup>32</sup>

Chinese military officials have emphasised the importance of securing the Tajik–Afghan border to counter the threat of terrorists and mercenaries entering into the Uyghur Autonomous Region from Afghanistan. The main focus is on Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, which borders both Afghanistan and China. According to China, securing this section of the border more strongly is of great concern to the People’s Republic. Beijing is therefore participating in the expansion of the defence infrastructure on the Afghan–Tajik border and is financing the construction of border checkpoints. This would also de facto grant the Chinese military control over the Wachan corridor.

2. China helps train military officers for the Tajik armed forces; about 500 Tajik officers have studied at Chinese military universities so far.

3. Joint military exercises are being held more and more often. In 2015, 250 members of Tajik special operations forces and the Chinese Ministry of Public Security took part in a drill in Gorno-Badakhshan for the first time. Special operations forces from both countries rehearsed defence strategies against mock terrorists who had infiltrated from Afghanistan. The training was observed by SCO representatives, including leaders from the Russian military. Similar drills were held in 2016 with as many as 10,000 soldiers.

In August 2019, the third in a series of joint military drills took place near the border with Afghanistan, this time at a larger scale and for the duration of three days. Tajik air forces and ground troops took part in the exercises, as did the special counter-terrorism unit of the People’s Liberation Army from the Chinese side. The exercises rehearsed coordination between the two partners in the hypothetical event that terrorist forces from Afghanistan managed to enter into China via Tajikistan. It is noteworthy that Russia was not involved in the exercises.<sup>33</sup>

According to a representative of the Tajik Ministry of Defence, drills of this sort are to be held annually starting in 2019. Observers believe that Russia will continue to be absent from these exercises.<sup>34</sup>

In general, China has made clear its willingness to establish a regional counter-terrorism coalition without Russia’s participation, as the counter-terrorism coalition which China initiated with Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2016 attests to. The initial aim of this coalition was to exchange intelligence information and hold joint training drills.<sup>35</sup> Later, a four-member body was formed to jointly combat terrorism and separatism. The participating countries send representatives from the Security Council to meet regularly to coordinate and plan. There was also a plan to establish an information and coordination centre in Ürümqi to exchange information and train Afghan, Pakistani, and Tajik counterterrorism units.<sup>36</sup> This effort is being successfully developed, as demonstrated by the declaration on cooperation in the fight against terror signed after the negotiations between the heads of state Rahmon and Xi.<sup>37</sup> The Russian expert V. Kashin considers the four-country coalition under the leadership of China to be quite successful.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, Tajikistan was the first country in the region to participate in Chinese initiatives for more security in Central Asia.

It is likely that China intends to get even more involved in the Afghanistan issue, with reports in the media of plans to establish a Chinese-funded military base in Afghanistan near the Tajik border.<sup>39</sup> This is another reason why military cooperation between China and Tajikistan is increasing.

### 3.2 THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN TAJIKISTAN AND CENTRAL ASIA AS A WHOLE

As Russia’s prominent position in Central Asia is gradually being overshadowed by China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative, the question of how to balance the interests of transit countries as well as of Russia and China, including in the security sector, has become particularly controversial. It remains to be seen how

32 Modžacheddin, N., “V Dušanbe budet sozdan tadžiksko-kitajskij antiterroističeskij centr (A Tajik-Chinese anti-terrorism centre is being established in Dushanbe)”, *ca-news.org*, 25 February 2016, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1456388820>.

33 Panfilova, V. “Kitajcy vyšli na ochranu tadžiksko-afganskoj granicy (The Chinese are now protecting the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan)”, *Nezavisimaja gazeta*, 30 July 2019, [www.ng.ru/cis/2019-07-30/1\\_7636\\_border.html](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2019-07-30/1_7636_border.html).

34 Ibid.

35 Ionova, E., “Tadžikistan v orbite interesov Kitaja i Rossii (Tajikistan in the sphere of interest of China and Russia)”, in *Rossija i novye gosudarstva Evrazii (Russia and new nations in Europe and Asia)*, March 2019, p. 114

36 Ibid.

37 “Rahmon nazval Kitaj strategičeskim partnerom Tadžikistana (Rahmon calls China a strategic partner of Tajikistan)”, *Mir 24*, 1 March 2020, <https://mir24.tv/news/16399921/rahmon-nazval-kitaj-strategičeskim-partnerom-tadžikistana>

38 Nazarov, P., “Strany ŠOS nachodjatsja na peredovom flange protivostojanija međunarodnomu terrorizmu (SCO countries fight on the front line against international terrorism)”, *Info ŠOS*, 18 January 2018, [www.infoshos.ru/ru/?idn=17786](http://www.infoshos.ru/ru/?idn=17786).

39 Ionova, E., “Tadžikistan v orbite interesov Kitaja i Rossii (Tajikistan in the sphere of interest of China and Russia)”, in *Rossija i novye gosudarstva Evrazii (Russia and new nations in Europe and Asia)*, March 2019, p. 114.

further developments on the New Silk Road will turn out, which is why experts remain extremely cautious in their assessment of the current state of affairs. There are different views on the transition from a Russia-oriented national and regional security architecture to a China-centred model. While Beijing's increasing military presence in Tajikistan worries Western military experts, Russian and Tajik experts generally do not express major concerns about China taking a more active role in securing the region. In the past, Russia was somewhat critical of large-scale Chinese projects in Tajikistan, but now Moscow's view is largely positive, and it seems to even welcome greater Chinese involvement in Central Asian security. Victor Litovkin, a retired colonel and military correspondent for the Russian news agency TASS, emphasises that "Tajikistan is an independent state and has a right to form military coalitions with any country". At the same time, as a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Tajikistan is obliged to coordinate its military alliances with other member countries.<sup>40</sup>

Tajikistan's membership in the SCO is the main prerequisite for increased military cooperation between Tajikistan and China. Because the fight against terrorism and extremism is one of the core tasks of the SCO, Russia supports cooperation between member states of the organisation in this area.

Viktor Litovkin further stressed that the Russian Federation is informed, but not concerned, about China's increasing involvement in the region's security.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, Russia shows readiness to participate in the new international forums that are emerging in connection with the changes in China's military policy. At the end of 2016, Moscow initiated a trilateral summit between Russia, China, and Pakistan on the topic of Afghanistan, the first in a series of four summits with Russian participation. In the same year, the first joint Russian–Pakistani training drills took place under the title "Friendship". In May 2018, during a visit to Moscow by the Prime Minister of Pakistan and the Chief of Staff of the Pakistan Army, both sides expressed their intention to enter into a strategic partnership to combat the threat of international

terrorism emanating from Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup> In March 2020, the two countries began talks on strengthening their strategic partnership.

At the same time, Russian military forces also became active in Tajikistan. In 2019, the Russian Federation donated large quantities of weapons and ammunition to the country as part of an assistance programme to modernise the Tajik army. The deliveries are planned to continue until 2024.

At the OSCE Forum on Security Co-operation in May 2019, at which was Tajikistan took over leadership of the organisation, the Russian representative remarked: "The first phase of the programme to modernise Tajikistan's armed forces has been underway since 2014. As part of this programme, Russia is supplying a wide range of helicopters, armoured vehicles and protective equipment, artillery weapons, firearms and ammunition. Goods worth a total of US\$ 122 million have already been delivered as part of the plan."<sup>43</sup>

In addition, the Russian military base 201 in Tajikistan continues to be expanded. With around 7,000 soldiers on regular duty, it is the largest Russian infantry base abroad. In the last two years, it has been equipped with the latest air defence systems, unmanned aerial vehicles and other military equipment. New infrastructure buildings are being constructed on the site, which can accommodate additional personnel and technology as needed.<sup>44</sup>

Russia continues to train Tajik military specialists and conscripts, both at training facilities in Russia and at the 201 military base; 500 Tajik non-commissioned officers were trained there in 2019. Three-month summer training courses were held in parallel at the Laur and Sambuli training centres.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, "combat brotherhood" exercises held by the CSTO joint forces are regularly held in Tajikistan. Russia, in addition to other members of the military bloc, regularly holds joint exercises with the Tajik army, including in 2020 despite the pandemic. Military cooperation with Russia noticeably intensified when Tajikistan took over the leadership of the CSTO in 2021.<sup>46</sup> During this period, Tajikistan proposed to prioritise a number of issues, including measures to ease the situation in the Tajik–Afghan border area

40 Panfilova, V. "Kitajcy vyšli na ochranu tadžiksko-afganskoj granicy (The Chinese are now protecting the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan)", *Nezavisimaja gazeta*, 30 July 2019, [www.ng.ru/cis/2019-07-30/1\\_7636\\_border.html](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2019-07-30/1_7636_border.html).

41 Ibid.

42 Ionova, E., "Tadžikistan v orbite interesov Kitaja i Rossii (Tajikistan in the sphere of interest of China and Russia)", in *Rossija i novye gosudarstva Evrazii (Russia and new nations in Europe and Asia)*, March 2019, p. 114; Saleem Qamar Butt: "Pakistano-rossijskoe strategičeskoe partnerstvo (Pakistani-Russian strategic partnership)", *InoSMI*, 15 April 2019, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20190419/244972490.html>

43 Pogrebnjak, E., "Rossija i Kitaj ukrepljajut oboronosposobnost' Tadžikistana (Russia and China strengthen Tajikistan's defences)", *Ritm Evrazii*, 17 September 2020, <http://mirperemen.net/2020/09/rossiya-i-kitaj-ukreplyayut-oboronosposobnost-tadžikistana>

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 "Predsedatel' SKB ODKB, Prezident Tadžikistana Ėmomali Rakhmon utverdil Plan realizacii rešenij sessii SKB i prioritetov tadžikskoj storony v 2021 godu (Chairman of the Collective Security Council of the CSTO and President of Tajikistan Ėmomali Rahmon has confirmed the plan to implement the Council's decisions as well as the targets for 2021 formulated by the Tajik side), 18 February 2021, <https://paodkb.org/events/predsedatel-skb-odkb-prezident-tadžikistana-ėmomali-rahmon>

and an agreement on an international CSTO target programme to secure the Tajik–Afghan border section.<sup>47</sup> Special attention was paid to the development of the overall situation in Afghanistan and the long-term rising global threat of terrorism, extremism,

various forms of radicalism and international organised crime, including illicit drug trafficking. In this context, President Rahmon stressed the urgent need to develop the CSTO’s capacity to effectively combat the aforementioned security risks.

## 4 CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Tajikistan’s nascent political system has been under construction for three decades within a rapidly changing world order. Russia continues to play a major role in this process. Although the Tajik population still has strong ties to Russia, the political influence of the “Russian world” is rapidly declining. The border closures occasioned by the pandemic—with the suspension of road traffic and labour and education migration linking Tajikistan to Russia—strengthened this tendency considerably. At the same time, neighbouring China is using an increasing variety of instruments to continually expand its influence in Tajikistan, including investments, substantial interventions in the economic and land ownership system as well as in local labour relations, but also an increasing engagement with security issues in Tajikistan and the entire region

It is common knowledge that Beijing’s economic interests are to give its own companies access to Tajik raw materials, to anchor Chinese companies and the

Chinese diaspora in the country, and perhaps later even to annex Tajik territories. However, Tajikistan is even more important for China as a kind of “transit zone” for traffic with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and other Central Asian countries. Above all, however, the country plays an important role in guaranteeing China’s internal security.

All in all, it can be said that the People’s Republic, which used to focus primarily on economic expansion, is currently shifting its strategy to focus more and more on intervening in global political processes, including the use of military force—as its undertakings in Tajikistan attest to. China’s central political objective is to establish a stable pro-Chinese orientation among Tajikistan’s ruling elites; at the same time, it wants to prevent Tajikistan from being drawn into potential anti-Chinese alliances and to prevent Islamist extremists from coming to power in Dushanbe. One thing is certain: This programme will shape the near future of Tajik–Chinese relations.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.