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KEY DIRECTIONS OF TAJIKISTAN'S CURRENT FOREIGN POLICY

Central Asia is undergoing significant changes in terms of international relations. The leadership changes in the region that may lead to the transformation in regional dynamics coupled with the shift of interest of major powers towards the East, especially to Central Asia, are examples of this. Governments in Central Asia are following this process carefully while looking for new opportunities for their countries. Tajikistan, which has not yet experienced any fundamental changes in its internal and external politics, is putting efforts to harvest advantages of this transitional period. Therefore, it would be useful to analyze recent developments in Tajikistan under president-for-life Emomali Rahmon in the context of regional developments.

Being among the most vulnerable countries of Central Asia due to its economic potential and political structure, Tajikistan is critical for maintaining security and stability in the region. The geographical connectivity to Afghanistan in the south causes security concerns not only to Tajikistan but also to neighboring Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, China, and even to Kazakhstan and Russia. In addition to its disadvantageous geographical position, Tajikistan is the only Central Asian country that faced the devastation of a civil war during 1992-1997, which still has implications in its social and economic structures. Therefore, Russia and China are actively involved in ensuring political and economic stability in Tajikistan, especially for regional security reasons. In its turn, the Tajik government acknowledges the mentioned concerns and creates new opportunities in foreign policy by taking into account the investment potential of major powers such as China and Russia.

Tajikistan pursues an "open door" policy by following the multivector strategy and supporting the centuries-old experience of friendly co-existence of the peoples of Central Asia. Within the framework of these principles, Tajikistan runs its foreign policy activities based on equality and mutual interests, while encouraging foreign investments for the development of the country. As a result, the Tajik foreign policy in recent years has given priority to economic, trade and foreign investment. In particular, over the past five years, around \$5 billion of foreign investments, of which \$2 billion in the form of foreign direct investments, have been attracted to the country. Investments have been directed to the industrial, energy and construction sectors, as well as to the development of infrastructure and tourism sectors. As a result of these investments, the share of the private sector in the country's GDP in 2019 reached 70%, which is 12% more than in 2013. Considering that agriculture and industry account for 18.9% and 21.9% of the country's GDP, respectively, these investments can be regarded as sizeable for Tajikistan's economy. Undoubtedly, the key role in Tajikistan's multi-vector foreign policy is to be attributed to President Emomali Rahmon, who has been ruling the country since 1992 (in 1992-1994 as the chairman of the Supreme Council). According to the constitutional amendments of 2016, President Rahmon became a "Leader of

the Nation", which allows him to run for office indefinitely and be immune from prosecution for life. Given that the next presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2020, it can be said that Rahmon will remain the longest-ruling Central Asian president. Nevertheless, Tajikistan's stable and autocratic regime suits the foreign policy interests of its major partners, including Russia and China that are among the top trading partners of the country. Russia remains among the key partners due to its economic, military and political support, while remittances from Tajik migrant workers in Russia is an important source of national income. In particular, according to Russia's Central Bank, in 2018, around \$2.5 billion of remittances were sent from Russia, which is equivalent to Tajikistan's 34% of GDP, and this fairly shows the level of dependency of Tajikistan on the Russian economy. Meanwhile, the overall trade between the countries reached \$1 billion in 2018, while Russia invested around \$1.7 billion in Tajikistan. In addition to trade and economic relations, the military sphere is another area of cooperation, where the Russian government has maintained substantial presence since Tajikistan's independence, especially because of the civil war. In particular, the 201st military base, one of the largest Russian military bases abroad, is situated in Tajikistan and will remain there until 2042, according to the 2012 agreement. In addition, Russia's military specialists work on Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan and train the Tajik army. In general, over the past five years, the Russian government has transferred weapons and military equipment worth \$122 million to the Tajik armed forces. Russia's diplomatic support of Tajikistan is also evident at the multinational platforms, while Tajikistan remains in the orbit of the pro-Russian integration processes, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, with Moscow actively pushing Dushanbe to join the Eurasian Economic Union.

China's involvement in Tajikistan deserves global attention, as the country owes around \$1.3 billion to the Chinese Eximbank, which is more than 40% of the country's total external debt. Unsurprisingly, Tajikistan's cooperation with China is studied as a case study of the Chinese "debt trap" within the Belt and Road Initiative. However, this fact did not stop Tajik authorities from concluding an agreement on the construction of the China-funded parliamentary building in 2018. Overall, there are more than 100 Chinese companies operating in various sectors of Tajikistan, with an investment volume of more than \$500 million. The Chinese CCTV system and traffic cameras are another example of the engagement of Chinese business in Tajikistan. Apart from that, there are Chinese companies that operate in areas such as infrastructure, construction of industrial facilities, the use of mining fields, school construction, etc., whereas the successful operation of the country's gold plants and mining industry is also largely due to Chinese investments. Bilateral trade between China and Tajikistan amounted to \$560 million, yet imports

exceeded exports by almost 16 times. In addition, around 2,000 hectares of land were allocated to Chinese farmers in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region.

Beijing's considerable interest in Tajikistan, as shown by the figures above, is driven by its proximity to Afghanistan, since China relates the security of its western borders with the stability of Tajikistan. The threat of terrorism and instability that can spread to Tajikistan from Afghanistan can be seen as the main risk factors for China's western borders. For this reason, China further developed its military cooperation with Tajikistan in 2016, establishing the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism, which also included Pakistan and Afghanistan. Based on this mechanism, the Chinese side built 10 guardhouses in the Pamir region bordering with Afghanistan and took steps to equip and train a mountain brigade of the Afghan army. However, according to the Washington Post article, there is much more involvement of Chinese troops in the Afghanistan-Tajik border, some of which are veiled in secrecy. Thus, in general, the Chinese engagement with Tajikistan is based on China's strategic security interest further enhanced due to its investments in Tajikistan. The issue of military bases was also emphasized during the recent visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Dushanbe in June 2019, when the parties agreed to deepen their comprehensive strategic partnership.

Apart from China and Russia, Dushanbe also tries to improve cooperation with the Central Asian states. Kazakhstan is a country of great importance for Tajikistan as the second-largest trading partner; Uzbekistan is important in terms of road and rail transport systems; and Kyrgyzstan in terms of cooperation in the field of hydropower as well as trade and economic relations. Therefore, along with other Central Asian leaders, President Rahmon is aware of the potential of regional cooperation, and actively supports Central Asian cooperation within the regional arrangements. Besides, as a result of internal developments after independence, radical religious movements became quite active in Tajikistan due to the geographic position of the country. Moreover, Tajikistan was the only Central Asian country that before the 2016 referendum had an official religious political party – the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). Hence, facing the risks and threats posed by Afghanistan-based religious extremist groups and terrorist organizations, Tajikistan is among the core states that provide stability to the whole region.

Thereby, even though Tajikistan's foreign policy does not experience radical changes, a relatively stable process has been observed with the help and support of Russia, China and the Central Asian countries. Although the country's debt burden is increasing day by day, the 'open door' policy can be regarded as a success for President Rahmon in terms of sustaining the country's economy. At the same time, considering the current economic structure and resources of the country, it can be stated that there are no other options available for Tajik authorities.

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Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The member states of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council) celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Nakhchivan Agreement. The document that established the organization was signed by Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on October 3, 2009, which is marked annually as the Turkic Speaking States Cooperation Day (MFA.gov.tr, 03.10.2019).
- President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev received Secretary General of the Turkic Council Bagdad Amreyev in Tashkent. The parties agreed that the forthcoming accession of Uzbekistan to the Turkic Council following its ratification of the Nakhchivan Agreement would further strengthen productive multilateral cooperation within the framework of the organization (Kun.uz, 05.10.2019).
- According to Chairman of Russia's Federation Council Valentina Matvienko, the presidents of Uzbekistan and Russia agreed to create working group to analyze possible conditions and risks for Uzbekistan to join the EAEU. In his turn, First Deputy Chairman of Uzbekistan's Senate Sodiq Safoyev noted that Uzbekistan would only proceed from its national interests in making a final decision on accession (Kun.uz, 04.10.2019).
- The 16th annual meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club was held in the Russian city of Sochi under the theme "The Dawn of the East and the World Political Order". The final plenary session of the event was attended by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, the Philippines and Russia. The participants discussed the growing role of Asia as the world's largest and most populated region in global affairs (Kremlin.ru, 03.10.2019).
- In his interview to Al Jazeera, President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon commented on the situation in Afghanistan. According to Rahmon, security and stability in Central Asia depends on the situation in Afghanistan, which has no military solution. The Tajik president emphasized that the future of Afghanistan must be in the hands of the Afghan people (MFA.tj, 04.10.2019).
- The OSCE and Tajikistan's Ministry of Internal Affairs organized a series of two-day training courses on trafficking in human beings in Dushanbe. Some 30 investigation officers from the ministry attended the courses that covered topics including the national and international legal frameworks, forms of human trafficking, protection measures available to law enforcement agencies, identification of victims and support services (OSCE.org, 04.10.2019).
- The 17th meeting of the prosecutors general of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states was held in Bishkek. During the meeting, the delegations discussed ways of improving collaboration between the prosecutors' offices in combating contraband and illegal trafficking of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors (Sectsco.org, 04.10.2019).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- A regular session of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council took place in Yerevan, as part of Armenia's chairmanship in the EAEU. The key item on the session's agenda was the signing of the framework agreement on comprehensive economic cooperation and the free trade agreement between the EAEU and Singapore (Primeminister.am, 01.10.2019).
- The deputy prime ministers of Belarus and Tatarstan chaired a meeting of the joint working group on bilateral cooperation held in Minsk. The parties agreed to keep the mutual trade volume in 2019 above \$1 billion, the threshold reached in 2017, and discussed the implementation of collaborative projects, including the production of gas tractor engines (Government.by, 01.10.2019).
- The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Uzbekistan held a regular meeting of the Uzbek-Russian Business Council. The participants discussed the successful implementation of the "green corridor" system between the two countries, which allowed to simplify customs procedures and accelerate the delivery of fruits and vegetables grown in Uzbekistan to customers in various regions of Russia (UzDaily, 01.10.2019).
- Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan continue talks on establishing an international center of economic cooperation called "Central Asia" on the Kazakh-Uzbek border. The center is intended to introduce a new format of wholesale and retail trade, develop international tourism, improve logistics services and establish cross-border business cooperation. The project will create 10,000 jobs at its implementation stage and more than 40,000 jobs after the center is launched (Kazinform, 03.10.2019).
- Kazakhstan's Ministry of Energy, together with the Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources, plans to adopt a Geological Exploration Program for 2021-2025 in 2020. Along with offshore projects, it is planned to intensify exploration in promising little-studied territories of Kazakhstan, including the Aral, Syrdarya, Shu-Sarysu, North Torgay, and Irtysh basins (Government.kz, 02.10.2019).
- According to the National Bank of Kyrgyzstan, in January-July 2019, remittances to Kyrgyzstan decreased by 13.4%, compared to the same period of 2018, and reached \$1.1 billion. One of possible reasons for the decline in the remittance flow is the introduction of limits on cash transfers via payment systems by Russia, which is the major source of remittances to Kyrgyzstan (Kabar, 01.10.2019).
- According to Chinese Ambassador in Turkmenistan Sun Weidong, in 1992-2018, trade between the two countries increased more than 1,800 times – from \$4.5 million to \$8.4 billion. Since the commissioning of the China-Turkmenistan gas pipeline at the end of 2009, China imported more than 250 billion cubic meters of Turkmen gas in total (News Central Asia, 01.10.2019).

Society and Culture

- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report. The report was presented at the international scientific conference "Life Strategies and Mobility of Youth in Central Asia: Challenges, Prospects and Potential". During the conference, the report findings and issues of youth migrants in Central Asia were discussed (UNESCO, 18.10.2019).
- Kazakhstan expanded the list of countries with visa-free entry, adding Bahrain, Colombia, Indonesia, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Oman, the Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, the Vatican and Vietnam. Citizens of these countries can now enter Kazakhstan without visa for 30 calendar days. This measure is aimed at increasing the number of foreign investors and tourists (Kazinform, 30.09.2019).
- TURKSOY organized the 16th meeting of photographers of the Turkic world in the Kyrgyz city of Osh, the 2019 Cultural Capital of the Turkic World. 12 photographers from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Cyprus, Russia, Turkey, and Uzbekistan took pictures of the city's natural and historical sites, which were presented at an exhibition held at the conclusion of the event (TURKSOY.org, 04.10.2019).
- Under the program "World Mongolians" adopted by the government of Mongolia, a conference dedicated to issues of Mongolians studying overseas was held in the Hungarian village of Lakitelek. About 200 Mongolian students studying in 11 countries attended the conference to discuss topics such as youth development policy and actions, opportunities to work at international organizations, and skills that can lead to success (Montsame.mn, 04.10.2019).
- The Days of Uzbek Cinema were held at the Central House of Cinematographers in Moscow, with the program featuring the best ten movies and four documentaries produced in Uzbekistan in recent years. Russian viewers had the opportunity to see modern Uzbek films on the big screen, as well as chat with their creators (Gazeta.uz, 02.10.2019).
- The travel portal TourStat included Nur-Sultan and Almaty in the top-10 list of the CIS cities to visit for tourist purposes in the fall of 2019. Nur-Sultan and Almaty are on the second and fourth positions, respectively, while the Belarusian capital Minsk leads the ranking. According to TourStat, Nur-Sultan and Baku are popular destinations among shopping lovers (Kazinform, 02.10.2019).
- According to the ranking published by The Independent, Kiev is one of the eight top spots in Europe for gastronomes. The British newspaper notes that the foodie scene of the Ukrainian capital is decidedly underrated. In addition to chicken, travelers are advised to taste varenyky, beetroot borsch and pig ears (The Independent, 04.10.2019).