

RECIPIENT, ACTIVIST, PROTECTOR: THREE MODES OF TAJIKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

Tajikistan's independence, and thus, the early years of its international interactions, was inaugurated by a scorching internal conflict known as the Tajik Civil War. The post-civil war government faced a long list of problems related to poverty, security and development. These issues have, in turn, determined the evolution of Tajikistan's relations with its key international partners.

The civil war period featured growing international attention to this part of Central Asia. In particular, Russia, China, the US and the EU emerged as major international partners of Tajikistan. However, the nature and intensity of Dushanbe's engagement with each has varied. More specifically, Tajikistan's foreign policy reflected three driving forces: economic needs, security threats and the need for consolidated political power. These factors led to the development of three different approaches, or three "modes" of Tajikistan's engagement with its international partners. These are the modes of "silent recipient", "noble activist" and "vigilant protector". A proper understanding of these will allow looking into the future of this peculiar triple-styled diplomacy of a small Central Asian state, which seeks to promote its own agenda, while accommodating the interests of its partners.

MODE ONE: SILENT RECIPIENT

Tajikistan tends to play a submissive role when building and maintaining ties with Russia and China. Both Moscow and Beijing currently position themselves as strategic partners of Tajikistan. Dushanbe is a member of various Russia-led regional organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) where the steering wheel is split between Russia and China. In relation to these two giant international partners, Tajikistan positions itself as a silent recipient.

Tajikistan and Russia

Russia has a long history in Central Asia, which is taken into account by policy makers, and it has become a decisive element in Central Asian states' foreign policies. Legacies of Tsarist and Soviet rule have a big impact on every aspect of life in Central Asian countries, and Tajikistan is no exception.

One of such legacies is the commonality of state apparatuses inherited from the Soviet period characterized by repressive rule, strict regulations and prevalence of common over individual. This Soviet governmentality remained intact even after the collapse of the Soviet Union as many policy makers from Central Asia receive their education in Russia. For example, until present employees of Tajikistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Internal Affairs annually receive training at Russian educational institutions, in particular in the Diplomatic Academy and the Academy of MVD. It serves as a unifying factor as it enhances mutual understanding among leaders based on the same knowledge, views and, of course, language.

Russia in the minds of Tajikistan's policy makers remained the "center" as used in the Soviet terminology. Former dominion is still a power that Tajikistan has to consult with. Because of that the rapprochement of Tajikistan and Russia after the collapse of Soviet Union was intuitive for both parties.

Today, Tajikistan hosts a Russian military base and over the last decade had extensive military cooperation with Russia. The bulk of Tajikistan's army equipment comes from Russia [1]. Military training and joint military exercises, especially for border guards, are organized regularly on the territory of Tajikistan with Russian counterparts [2].

Both countries share views on security threats that originate in Afghanistan. Russia needs a buffer zone between itself and Afghanistan, while Tajikistan needs assistance in securing its borders.

Russia's position in its relations with Tajikistan is firm, which is further bolstered by the presence of Tajik labor migrants on its territory. At first, their legal status in Russia was considered as a leverage that Russia could use against Tajikistan, but now it has become evident that no leverage was even needed. Membership in Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) would bear clear benefits for Tajikistan in terms of migrants' legal status in Russia: less the problems migrants face in Russia, the more remittances they would send home. The discussion over Tajikistan's membership started in 2014 [3] but did little progress beyond talks.

It was evident that Tajikistan has little to offer the EEU, as economically it cannot reach the level of Kazakhstan or Belarus; its tourism infrastructure and textile production cannot compete with Kyrgyzstan.

The status of Tajik migrants in Russia is deteriorating due to stricter regulations introduced by Russian migration policy [4]. Recent signing of the agreement between Tajikistan and Russia on curbing migration inflows and switching to the mode of organized migration [5] is the epitome of the migration issue. Potential accession to EEU is no longer actively discussed in Tajikistan, and Russia still remains an important ally. Tajikistan can no longer rely on chances for easing the migration regime, but it is impossible to reduce security cooperation as a counteraction as Tajikistan is still dependent on a stronger military partner.

Tajikistan's need for security assistance puts it in a receiving position from Russia. Tajik-Russian ties are shaped by Russia and how it sees Tajikistan in its own political, economic and security agenda. Such mode of relationship is evocative of a master-apprentice relationship, with experienced and prominent figure on one side and an aspiring and needy student on the other.

Tajikistan and China

While Russia was initially an obvious security partner for Tajikistan, in recent years China became a key economic partner. After economic devastation in 1990s, Tajikistan was in urgent need for economic assistance and investment. China became a perfect economic partner for Tajikistan. Unlike the World Bank or IMF, China has presented itself as an aid provider that does not call for economic reforms.

Today China owns 1.2 billion USD of overall Tajik foreign debt [6]. In Tajikistan, favorable conditions were created for Chinese industrial companies to operate. China enjoys permission to bring workers from China, low pressure on public access to information about their enterprises, tax exemptions and support of local government.

Recently the Chinese mining company Kashgar Xinyi Dadi received exclusive rights for development of Yakjilva silver deposit in Murghab region, which is in the east of Tajikistan [7]. Obscure details concerning the deal and in particular potential benefits for the country, invoked public distrust. Both central and regional governments immediately reacted by vocally expressing confidence over wholesome implications of the deal. However, little information is available for the public which only reignites skepticism in the media and among the population.

Tajikistan demonstrated little intention to block Chinese initiatives and projects not only in the economic sphere but also in political realm. Since 1996, Tajikistan and China were in the process of delimitation of their border [8]. Initially Tajikistan was cautious during negotiations over disputed territory in Pamir region that borders China's Xinjiang. It resulted in moderate split of land between the two, but in the following years Tajikistan made more territorial concessions. Finally, in 2011 Tajikistan leased over 2000 hectares of its land to China, [9] which immediately sparked discussion of Chinese expansion in Central Asia.

In the late 2000s China appeared to be interested in security aspect of its relations with Tajikistan in order to ensure security in Xinjiang as well as secure its assets in Tajikistan. In the last couple of years, China has been engaged in military training on Tajikistan's territory close to the Afghan border [10]. In addition, Chinese government agreed to build 11 new border checkpoints on the Tajik-Afghan border [11]. Leaders of both countries display willingness to upgrade their ties to the strategic level, which is a notable milestone in the Tajik-Chinese rapprochement.

In the case of Russia, Tajikistan has seen historical ties, similarities in governance and security contribution as driving factors for building a strong relationship. China does not share the same historical background with Tajikistan; the two countries neither share culture nor language. What is common between them is the authoritarian party rule, robust nexus between government and big businesses and repressive policies. China's foreign policy in general is politically neutral. Beijing does not interfere in internal affairs, including the matters of human rights and rule of law. For Tajikistan, it is more than enough as it is receiving financial (and now military) assistance and infrastructure.

Along with the differences in Tajikistan's engagement with Russia and China, there are similarities in these relations that allow us to categorize Dushanbe a "silent partner" vis-à-vis both Moscow and Beijing. There are several characteristics in these relations that qualify Tajikistan as a "silent partner". First, the foreign counterparts command important resources that Tajikistan needs. Second, Tajikistan's geographic position represents a strategic interest for the foreign counterpart. Third, the foreign counterparts share a common view with Tajikistan that the state institution can be used to prolong the ruling regime's life.

These three factors stipulate Tajikistan's position within a relationship as a partner which receives a resource at the expense of depriving itself of an ability to stand on its ground and protect its own interest. The latter, however, does not raise an issue for Dushanbe, since foreign partners such as Russia and China do not challenge the legitimacy of the ruling regime.

MODE TWO: NOBLE ACTIVIST

The essence of this mode lays in active participation in high-level summits, promoting the environment agenda through Tajikistan's development perspective face to face with international community. Noble activism was once at the core of Tajikistan's global diplomacy. Since the mid-2000s, Tajikistan had a clear objective to raise issues related to the environment on a global arena [12]. It coincided with an important milestone - the launch of the construction of the Rogun dam in 2004 [13]. The government sought to gain energy independence by utilizing its massive hydroelectric potential.

However, the financially restrained Tajik government could not take full fiscal responsibility for such an unprecedented project. Initially the project was not supported internationally. Russia at the beginning was the major partner of the construction, but after unreconciled disputes Russia decided to withdraw [14] in 2005. Later in 2010 the government launched initial public offer to raise private funds for the construction of Rogun. Accompanied by massive information campaign, the idea of Rogun [15] and its mission of lifting Tajikistan as major energy provider, evolved into a matter of nation-building [16]. The idea of energy independence that finally became achievable quickly resonated with public sentiments.

Similarly, Tajikistan demonstrated its concern over its international image. Tajikistan started to actively participate in the UN water initiatives. In 2003, Tajikistan contributed to the UN's declaration of the International Year of Fresh Water and hosted the International Fresh Water Forum [17]. These were the first steps towards international acknowledgement of Tajikistan's dedication to issues of global concern. These steps were followed up by Tajikistan's active participation in Water for Life decade [18], president Rahmon's speech at the Climate Change Forum in 2009 in Copenhagen [19] and Initiating UN's declaration of International Year of Water Cooperation in 2013 [20]. It allowed the Tajik government to position itself as an active promoter of global water-related issues [21].

By taking part in global forums and launching big initiatives, Tajikistan positioned itself as a promoter of sustainable development and water-related issues both for the international community and domestically. Tajik diplomacy demonstrated itself as an important tool for a once war-torn country that seeks recognition and expertise. Such needs required effective instruments for creating an image of Tajikistan as concerned and considerate champion for environmental issues. Tajikistan established close cooperation with UN agencies and other international aid providers, ready to commit to international standards in governance.

While in early 2010, the situation with human rights deteriorated, Tajikistan's role as global activist gradually diminished. Media faced strict regulations manifested in various cases of intimidation of journalists, fines and lawsuits against news outlets, blocking the access to online media, not to mention imprisonments of opposition members and their lawyers [22].

As for the environment and in particular water management, representatives of various international agencies continue their activities in cooperation with local environmental NGOs, while the state involvement is minimized.

A role of a “noble activist” was played by Tajikistan for a time just enough to attract foreign attention, increase the degree of public approval and to display the potential of diplomatic mechanisms within the “open doors” policy. Currently the media, official statements and overall international activity do not indicate that Tajikistan executes this sort of policy. International Branding and Environmental activism are no longer the priorities as today Tajikistan sees border and internal security as more important components of regime’s longevity.

Open doors policy no longer seems as a key element of Tajik foreign policy. Moreover, it indicates that such policy was effective only in the early period when the Tajik diplomacy was in the initial stages of development. Tajikistan was looking for its place in global geopolitics, utilizing all the available diplomatic tools and approaches towards various actors. Opening itself and participating in global environmental activism was a temporary initiative that initially aimed at long-term acknowledgement of the country’s contribution to global issues. With enhanced relationship with China, Tajikistan did no longer have the necessity for activism, confining itself only to participation in international forums for the sake of diplomatic courtesy.

Nonetheless, the Rogun dam is still in need for additional funding to operate at full power. Tajikistan desperately seeks for donor money, private investments and sources for budget revenues. However, due low international trust, Noble activism on international level will no longer be helpful to attract foreign funds.

MODE THREE: VIGILANT SOVEREIGNTY PROTECTOR

The second mode of Tajikistan’s international relations is that of a vigilant protector of its sovereignty, best seen in its relations with the West. Here, Tajikistan tends to act more scrupulously and confidently. Western partners play an important role for Tajikistan as valuable sources of aid and expertise for economic development. However, Tajikistan has disagreements with western partners on matters of governance and does not restrain itself in expressing dissent over those issues.

In other words, Tajikistan switches to the mode of vigilant protector of its sovereignty, a country that is not likely to make concessions at the expense of what it considers its national interests.

The civil war in Tajikistan has brought the attention of the international community to the problems of poverty and conflict-induced economic devastation in a newly emerged state. After 1996 the government welcomed initiatives of development aid organizations that were not only providing funds for revitalization of the economy but also building the capacity of local professionals. In early 2000s, Tajikistan proclaimed the policy of open doors [23], emphasizing a multiple-vector character of its foreign policy. Recovering from consequences of the conflict, the government sought to gain support from all available sources, including the West.

By “Western world” or “Western partners” the Tajik government and local media as well as the general public understand every entity that comes from Europe and North America, including the US, EU, UK and such intergovernmental institutions as OSCE. These actors are among those who contend for economic development and security through democratization, rule of law and respect for human rights in developing countries.

Such an approach for development programs requires reforming and introduction of inclusive and transparent policies in the host country, which in the case of Tajikistan is difficult to achieve [24]. A misunderstanding lies in previously described views on state management and institutions. Tajikistan is characterized as an authoritarian regime with restrictive policies and undemocratic practices. Ideological mismatch is a huge obstacle not only for changes promoted by the West but also for negotiations with the West. It has not always been the case, however.

Until 2010, cooperation with the West was unhindered as political environment was at the initial phase and the authoritarian style of power was not yet fully revealed in Tajikistan. As an example, the press in Tajikistan was relatively free, as there were several independent media outlets after the end of civil war. The situation started to change after the emergence of China as the main donor, which did not only provide financial resources but also introduced initiatives for improvement of infrastructure and building new factories,. It turned out that the cooperation with the West was smooth only because of the absence of substantial alternative source of foreign investments and funds. With China's arrival, Tajikistan prioritized stable relationship with Beijing that shares Dushanbe's views on democratic reforms.

At the same time, Tajikistan started to demonstrate explicit hostility towards western partners. In 2016, the Tajik government downgraded the mandate of the OSCE Office in Dushanbe after participation of the representatives of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and other opposition leaders at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation meeting in Warsaw [25]. The international community in return began more actively criticizing the ongoing deterioration of democracy in Tajikistan. Recently the US openly criticized the situation with human rights in Tajikistan that Dushanbe claimed was “groundless” [26]. On the other hand, some Western partners took a more cautious approach. Thus, former EU president Donald Tusk praised Tajikistan for having all the potential for ensuring human rights and freedoms in his statement after his tour of Central Asian countries [27].

Tajikistan's relationship with Western partners is still complicated by ideological confrontation. At the same time, Tajikistan's proximity to Afghanistan and poor border control causes security concerns in the West. These concerns force Western partners to adjust their programs in Tajikistan in order to avoid the confrontation with Tajik authorities. They view keeping the relationship stable as a crucial element for maintaining control over the security of the region. Thus, the West is playing the role of concessions-maker while Tajikistan is vigilantly “protecting” its sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

The three categories discussed in the paper were an attempt to break down the Tajik foreign policy and systematize it. It was shown that foreign policy of Tajikistan depends on several factors such as the view on government and eagerness to provide financial resources for infrastructure and hard security equipment. This situation grants a certain country an advantageous position in relationship with Tajikistan. If a country does not fit into these frames, Tajikistan finds itself in a more confident and straightforward position to express disagreement. At the same time, Tajikistan was willing to position itself as a promoter of environmental issues, actively joining global environmental initiatives.

Initially Tajikistan used the policy of “open doors” to demonstrate its non-partisan position in global politics and secure support from all partners. Later, national security

and preservation of the regime grew a central part in formulating foreign policy. As a result, Tajikistan abandoned multiple-vector policy, and moved towards exclusive rapprochement with China and maintaining close relationship with Russia, which deprives Tajikistan of multiplicity of options in terms of political maneuvers. ✕

NOTES

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