

Tajikistan: Imperfect storm

Tajikistan is suffering on three sides, and on at least two of them there is an argument to be had on whether the wounds are largely self-inflicted. Politically, the country has taken Russia's side in the invasion of Ukraine and this is causing opprobrium. Economically, it is feeling the knock-on effect of sanctions. And socially, Afghan militants on the eastern border, emboldened by the Taliban's resumption of power, are contesting the territorial boundaries. Can Tajikistan survive this imperfect storm?



Tajikistan and Russia have a close relationship, even though the former is not part of the Eurasian Union which is dominated politically and economically by Russia. The two have long been aligned politically, the Russian language is spoken and used across much of Tajikistan, and more than a million Tajiks work in their larger neighbour, supplying finance equivalent to 30% of the country's entire GDP. While a growing youth cohort are in opposition to Russia, not only in terms of the war but in the general servile position of Tajikistan to Moscow, there is little they can practicably do and Tajikistan is one of Russia's few close allies that can expect to receive its own political sanctions and boycott as the West attempts to strangle Russia's remaining support mechanisms.

Economically speaking, the effects of the war have a direct on Tajikistan for the simple reason that it is dependent on imports for food, products and supplies. If these are more expensive in Russia, then they will be even more so in Tajikistan. Dushanbe's economy has never been particularly strong – currently ranked the poorest in the Central Asian region – and the ongoing effects of the sanctions will push this down even further. What industry there is in the country is heavily dependant on actors such as Russia and China both for the continuation of current business, and for the development and facilitation of infrastructure and new opportunities. Being in thrall to such nations risks casting Tajikistan further into their debt (politically and economically) at a time when battle lines are quietly being drawn, and means that Western businesses looking to enter Tajikistan for mining/tech development, and so on, risk the major sectors being already carved up by Russian and Chinese interests that will not take kindly to interlopers.

On top of all this, Tajikistan hosts a thriving black market built primarily on heroin trafficking through Afghanistan and the endemic corruption in the political and corporate sectors. It is worth stating that none of this has a real chance of changing, as the political and economic elite clearly benefit from the corruption, while the relationships with Russia and China are as much about pure survival as they are about expediency.

Looking broader, Tajikistan faces problems from border to border. On the shared border with Kyrgyzstan, exchanges of gunfire are as regular as accusations (from both sides) that one nation has strayed into the territory of the other – difficult when much of the border is not officially demarcated and control is relative. The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region is subject to frequent clashes between protestors and police over alleged repression of the former by the latter, although the official government line relating to 'organised criminal groups' is at least a half-truth. And along the southern reaches, Afghan militants are blamed for rocket strikes and increasing tensions – particularly so as Tajikistan does not have formal relations with the Taliban.

Tajikistan has publicly announced its intent to take more of a central role in Central Asia. Under the current outline, it is facing crises that put it in no position to lead, nor to act as a reputable hub for ongoing business.

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