Rogun Dam — A Unifying Factor for Citizens of Tajikistan

«The processes related to the implementation of Rogun Dam project have shown that Tajikistan can progressively plan and implement its long-term development programme. This discourse depends, first of all, on the political will and, secondly, on the citizens’ understanding of the project significance, i.e. social basis,» – political analyst Sherali Rizoyon wrote in his article for the analytical platform CABAR.asia.

**Brief review of the article:**

- Construction of Rogun dam halted with the break-up of the USSR and the ensuing civil disturbances in Tajikistan;
- In the post-conflict period, Rogun dam was seen as a symbol of revival of Tajikistan;
- After a vain search for investors, Tajikistan continued to build Rogun dam in 2018 using its own resources;
- The experience of Rogun dam construction shows that the states of Central Asia benefit much from joint and reasonable use of the hydraulic power of the basin of rivers Amu Darya and Syr Darya.

Over the last couple of years, the political processes occurring in Central Asian region have significantly changed and entered the new stage of development. The frequency of meetings between the leaders of states in the region, visits to neighbouring states with the purpose of further deepening of bilateral relations can mark a milestone. The previous year has caused positive changes in Central Asian states and solution of “unsolved” issues; a positive change can be seen in water-power cooperation. Amid these positive changes, the first station of Rogun dam was launched on November 16, 2018, which was a landmark event in the contemporary history of Tajikistan. This event has been welcomed by the citizens of the country and contributed to their confidence in the future, in economic capacity building and energy independence. Rogun dam for the nationals of Tajikistan is more than just a dam. Political will upon the completion of this facility has brought all citizens together regardless of their political preferences and strengthened their confidence in better tomorrow.
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The ceremony of launch of the first power station of Rogun dam. Photo: polytanalyse.com

Short story of Rogun dam construction

Tajikistan, after becoming independent, has suffered from the collapse of the USSR more than other Soviet republics: civil war, forced migration and poverty of people, destruction of industrial facilities, severe economic crisis and, consequently, acute socioeconomic problems.

In the first years of independence, the country was divided into three regions as the northern and eastern regions of the country were not linked by modern traffic infrastructure with the capital city. A strategy needed to be developed with the use of existing domestic facilities for the strengthening of the sovereignty. In this regard, the main advantage of Tajikistan is the availability of vast hydropower reserves, i.e. glacier-based rivers and lakes. Construction of Rogun dam was planned by the main directorate of energy and electrification at the Council of Ministers of Tajik SSR back in 1968. 335-metres high Rogun dam was initially designed not only for electricity generation, but as a key element of the whole system of Vakhsh river run-off control, namely a system that allowed, together with other downstream hydraulic facilities, maintaining the optimum level of water in Amu Darya during all seasons [2]. In September 1976, construction operations, as well as production of
transformers and hydraulic turbines for Rogun were launched in Ukraine, and hydroelectric generators - in Sverdlovsk [3].

Construction halted with the break-up of the USSR and the ensuing civil disturbances in Tajikistan. As they say, misfortunes never come alone. The tragedy occurred on May 8, 1993, when the existing coffer dam was washed away by a severe flood, and tunnels and the main generator hall were partially flooded [3].

In early 2000s, after the civil war, Tajikistan was actively promoting the Rogun dam project among international partners during the period of active economic and vital infrastructure rehabilitation. In the post-conflict period, Rogun dam was seen as a symbol of revival of Tajikistan. Vast financial resources and foreign investments were needed to complete the dam project.

In 2004, an agreement on the completion of dam construction was signed between the government of Tajikistan and RUSAL during the formal visit of the President of Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, to Tajikistan. Active works started on the construction site, the main generator hall was dried. However, tensions arose due to the interference of influential neighbours and due to the uncertain future of the industrial giant of Tajikistan,
TALCO. RUSAL pressed for the change in the dam type and for the decrease in the height to 285 metres. In 2007, the government of Tajikistan officially terminated the agreement with RUSAL as its conditions were unacceptable for the country. Tajikistan continued to build Rogun dam in 2018 using its own resources. In January 2010, the nationwide campaign was launched to sell shares of the uncompleted dam: 5 million shares and certificates were issued by Rogunskaya GES company in the amount of 6 billion somonis (nearly 1.37 billion dollars), with par value of 100 somonis, and share certificates with par values of 500, 1,000 and 5,000 somonis. In one year, 820 million 200 thousand somonis were raised, which amounted to 186.2 million dollars at the then-rate [4]. The main buyers of shares of Rogun dam were the nationals of Tajikistan: employees of government-owned institutions, educational, cultural institutions, entrepreneurs, etc. In general, the campaign drew attention of employees in all spheres, and this process could be called one of the first successful attempts of uniting the citizens, after the idea of national accord and completion of civil disturbances in Tajikistan.

On October 29, 2016, a high-profile event occurred in the modern history of Tajikistan, President of Tajikistan Emomali Rakhmon operated a bulldozer to obstruct Vakhsh River for
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Rogun dam.

**Rogun dam in the system of contemporary priorities of Tajikistan**

According to the first priority of the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan until 2030: economic transformation of Tajikistan requires energy security and efficient use of electricity [9], development of vast water power resources of the country. The aggregate hydropower potential of the country is known to be 527 billion kWh/year, only 5 per cent of which has been developed as of today [10,7]. Rogun dam, with positive international evaluation, plays a determining role in the utilisation of domestic water power resources of Tajikistan. Therefore, the National Strategy outlines “public and international recognition of security of the Rogun dam project on the downstream countries, its economic feasibility, environmental security and financial viability” [9].

Today, the completion of the Rogun dam project is divided into four phases:

1. Supply, installation and commissioning of electromechanical equipment for four turbines (4x600MW);
2. Further construction of the main dam;
3. Construction of right-bank facilities: hydraulic tunnels and dam outlets;

Rogun dam is unique because it can generate electricity during construction, sell energy and use the accumulated capital to complete construction. At first, the electricity generated by Rogun dam has been used to cover domestic needs because after 2008 the citizens of the country have been short of electricity in winter time. When the first station was launched, this issue has been eliminated from the agenda and rotating power cuts in the regions of Tajikistan have become history.

Today, Tajikistan exports electricity in summer time to Afghanistan, partially to Kyrgyzstan, and since early 2017 sells it to Uzbekistan. According to Usmonali Usmonzoda of the Tajik ministry of energy and water resources, 2.4 billion kWh of electricity was exported in 2018, which is 1.1 billion kWh more than in 2017. Out of all exported electricity, Uzbekistan has received 1.48 billion kWh (at 0.02 dollars/kWh in summer and 25 per cent more in winter, just as for citizens of Tajikistan) and Afghanistan has received 926 million kWh (at 0.04 dollars/kWh) [12]. The first station of Rogun dam generated 90 million kWh of electricity in 2018.

According to plans, electricity will be exported to South Asian countries, mainly to Pakistan. Construction of trans-regional power line CASA-1000 (Central Asia and South Asia) was launched on May 12, 2016 in the town of Tursunzade with the participation of the heads of member states, namely Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan. According to the
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project, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have an opportunity to become exporters of cheap and environmentally-friendly energy to the countries of South Asia, and also can ensure stable connection between national power grids of the states in both regions. Implementation of this project will drastically change the situation of these states in the regional policy as this power line is maintained efficient mainly by the hydropower capacity of Tajikistan, i.e. the operation of Rogun dam, as well as the chain of power plants on Naryn River in Kyrgyzstan. Another country important for the consumption of electricity generated by Tajik dams is Uzbekistan. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have been reported to sign the strategic partnership agreement in August 2018 and this factor determines largely the content of bilateral and multilateral relations. Today, Uzbekistan carries out large-scale reforms; industrial development and plans to build additional industrial capacity require access to cheap and environmentally-friendly electricity. In this context, existing natural resources of neighbouring countries may be used to contribute to welfare in both states, and the factor of competition may be transformed into a factor of close participatory development.

**Rogun dam in the regional policy of Central Asian states**

It should be admitted that the construction of Rogun dam is related to many developments in the regional processes of Central Asia. This project, which is now in its active phase of implementation, has been a joint effort of downstream countries in the Soviet Union and a stumbling block in the post-Soviet period, especially in the last 15 years. The regional countries’ policy regarding water and power resources in Central Asia has been largely shaped and changed around Rogun and Kambarata dams in Kyrgyzstan. The experience of Rogun dam construction shows that Central Asian states benefit much from joint and reasonable use of the hydraulic power of the basin of rivers Amu Darya and Syr Darya. Negative attitude, on the contrary, creates unfavourable conditions for close cooperation, which mainly afflicts average citizens.

A change in political environment in Central Asia after 2017 creates an opportunity for planning and implementation of long-term plans and strategies as the energy independence of the region from external factors makes it possible to build economic capacity and use existing natural resources for the benefit of the people. This experience as a whole contributes to integrated development of the region and reduction of such negative phenomena as crime, unemployment, extremism, and reduction of poverty level and promotion of social welfare. The latter is especially important for Tajikistan as the country faces redundancy of manpower and high level of labour migration to Russia and Kazakhstan.
A case of Rogun suggests the following conclusions:

1. Cooperation between the countries of the region is beneficial mainly for the Central Asian countries. This discourse is very important today because of the significant growth of mutual trade and saturation of markets with regional products.

2. Cooperation, mutual respect and recognition of national interests reduce the level of conflicts and ensure security and stability in circumstances where non-conventional threats turn into “conventional” ones. It should be emphasised here that the insufficient level of cooperation has made countries vulnerable to threats and challenges related to terrorism, extremism and illegal drug trafficking.

3. Today Central Asian region has developed and is implementing diverse initiatives of cooperative nature: common tourist visa, close cooperation within the region (the leaders of states are expected to meet in March 2019 in Tashkent before Navruz), completion of the boundary demarcation and delimitation processes, which are needed for domestic capacity-building and identity in contemporary international relations.
Findings and conclusions

Thus, the contemporary priorities system of Tajikistan associates vital prospects with Rogun dam, and the end of construction has shown natural expectations of citizens and cases that generally create favourable conditions for the pursuit of national interests:

**First of all,** Rogun dam prolongs the operation of Nurek dam for over 100 years. As this dam is the most upstream station in Vakhsh chain of power stations and allows accumulating water resources during seasonal floods and controlling further water level in Vakhsh River, the accumulated water may be used for irrigation amid water scarcity. The catchment area of Rogun dam in fact eliminates the need to accumulate water in the basins of power stations downstream of Vakhsh River for power generation.

**Second,** in the context of state independence, completion of Rogun dam construction will offer opportunities to develop vast hydropower resources of Tajikistan, which amount, according to preliminary estimates, to 527 billion kWh/year, only 5 per cent of which have been developed so far [10]. In the longer term, the increase of the annual electricity output up to 70 per cent of the existing capacity will help the country change its image significantly, raise the living standards and facilitate industrial development and output of natural resource products.

**Third,** as mentioned before, Rogun dam has played a positive role in the consolidation of the nation. A case of Rogun dam can be seen as a measure that expedites considerably the process of civil identity formation. Further perception of the role of Tajikistan in regional processes and its plans of domestic production capacity-building have been associated with Rogun dam. It should be emphasised that all citizens have understood the significance of energy security as hindered access to electricity in winter sometimes has resulted in death of people.

**Fourth,** the processes related to the implementation of Rogun Dam project have shown that Tajikistan can progressively plan and implement its long-term development programme. This discourse depends, first of all, on the political will and, secondly, on the citizens’ understanding of the project significance, i.e. social basis.

**Fifth,** the Rogun dam case improves the experience of sovereignty development and is a compelling argument in favour of the valid state. Negative concepts of former soviet republics used in the media scene don’t take into account all prerequisites for nation-building. A free and democratic society needs practical experience of sovereignty development for its building as “consumer’s thinking” largely hinders this process.

**Sixth,** the launch of the first station of Rogun dam has been a serious test for foreign policy of Tajikistan. The foreign political support of the completion of the construction project has played important role and practical experience has been gained in development a necessary strategy to protect and pursue national interests. Experience in searching for compromise solutions and consideration of foreign partners’ interests regarding major problems, which
serve national interests, create a far-reaching opportunity for the strengthening of foreign political planning.

**Seventh**, the new phase of foreign cooperation of Tajikistan has started today and the launch of the first station of Rogun dam can be associated with the rebranding of the country and positive image building at the regional level. This discourse is especially relevant to our country in terms of the successful project, which will turn the factor of competition into a factor of cooperation and participatory development. Qualitative development and strengthening of mutual relations between the countries in Central Asian region affect positively all the states and create conditions for the pursuit of their national interests.

Finally, more time and money are needed to complete the Rogun dam project, but we hope for the best. The regional policy shaped in Central Asia strengthens the belief in closer cooperation of countries, which is needed for the implementation of projects of national significance.

References:

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This article was prepared as part of the Giving Voice, Driving Change - from the Borderland to the Steppes Project implemented with the financial support of the Foreign Ministry of Norway. The opinions expressed in the article do not reflect the position of the editorial or donor.

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