

Countries such as India, Pakistan and Afghanistan are important partners for Tajikistan. However, with Russia and China present in Central Asia, not much attention has been paid to the South Asia region lately. The initially laid down multi-vector nature of Dushanbe's foreign policy is no longer considered so relevant, but nevertheless, Tajikistan's cooperation with its southern partners can still be called a priority. More in the following article for CABAR.Asia by specialist in international relations Madina Arbobova.

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Photo: Kremlin.ru

The constitution of Tajikistan declares the multivectoral foreign policy as the only policy that can accommodate country's national interests. Some commentators question Tajikistan's ability to actually dictate its own external agenda.

It is believed that Dushanbe is in a constant condition to coordinate its every move with Moscow when it comes to big international endeavours, involving Tajikistan. In that respect, Russia is able to use labour migrants as a leverage for political influence. Due to that Russian expert Oleg Panfilov proposes that for Tajikistan dependence on Russia comes with a permanent cost of inability to exercise self-sufficient foreign policy.^[1]

Tajikistan is also in a dependent position with China, who owns 53% of its external debt. Dushanbe is at risk to eventually find itself in a debt trap set by Beijing. In an attempt to mitigate possible risks and balance the growing presence of China, Tajikistan as well as the rest of Central Asia seeks to diversify its list of international partners.

Namely, recent years demonstrated Tajikistan's active interactions with countries of South Asia - India and Pakistan. The following article will try to discuss the potential of these countries to become a counterweight for Russia and China in Tajikistan.

India

Despite having high potential, cooperation between Tajikistan and India is rather volatile in terms of dynamics. Both countries are yet to unveil all spheres for cooperation.

Having a status of "developing country" did not impede India to become a third biggest global economy after the US and China. Economic advancement are usually followed by growth of geopolitical ambitions - this is something that has to be kept in mind when discussing India's position in the region.

According to Viradj Singh, ambassador of India to Tajikistan, the overall trade between two states has reached 50-60 million USD per year.^[2] But when compared to Russia (over 1 billion USD in trade) and China (660 million USD)^[3] India is far from being considered as top-notch economic player in Tajikistan. However, looking at the same numbers in 2018 it can be seen that trade has grown three times since then.^[4]

High poverty level will not allow India investing larger funds in Tajikistan's economy to the same extent as China. But it doesn't mean that India will not be longing to strengthen its position in Tajikistan for several reasons.



Viradj Singh, The Ambassador of India to the Republic of Tajikistan, photo: Avesto.tj

Tajikistan and Central Asia in general are important for India for strategical purposes, natural resources and trade. Having a long borderline with Afghanistan puts Tajikistan on the map of India's struggle with Pakistan over Kashmir due to geographical proximity.

To “come from the rear” of its longtime regional rival, India was on its way to deploy military presence to the north of Pakistani borders. In 2007 at the cost of 70 million USD India reconstructed the old Aini air base in Tajikistan, initially planning to use the premises for its own military base on the rental basis. [5] Moscow however did not endorse the eagerness of Indian government, which left this issue off the table since.

On the top of that, India sees Tajikistan as a source of minerals and a transit point for gas-producing countries. Aiming to exploit Tajikistan's potential India invests in infrastructure. In the beginning of 2020 Indian government allocated 46,5 million USD for the construction of the road connecting Dushanbe and the Chortugh mahalla.

Currently India is mostly focused on education and tourism cooperation with Tajikistan. Many students from India receive their degrees in Tajikistan and many Tajik nationals visit India for various trainings and educational programs. By the end of 2019 Tajik airline company Somon Air managed to launch direct flights from Dushanbe to Delhi.

Volatility of cooperation dynamics may lie in unwillingness to irritate Russia as India supports good ties with Russia who provide them with arms and military equipment.

Pakistan

Today Tajik-Pakistani relationship are relatively stable and have big potential for further development. Comparing with China and Russia, presence of Pakistan in Tajikistan is much smaller in scale, however positive economic dynamics demonstrates possible prospects for strengthening trade partnership. To support this notion it is important to keep in mind that Pakistan is in Tajikistan's top trade partners with overall turnover of 56,3 million USD in 2019. [\[6\]](#)

Pakistan also was one of the first to recognize Tajikistan as an independent state and consequently establish diplomatic relationship. Pakistan was also among group of mediatory countries during the time the Civil War in Tajikistan. Tajikistan in turn supported friendly ties with both Pakistan and India - another restraint for Dushanbe to fully unfold its cooperation with South Asia.

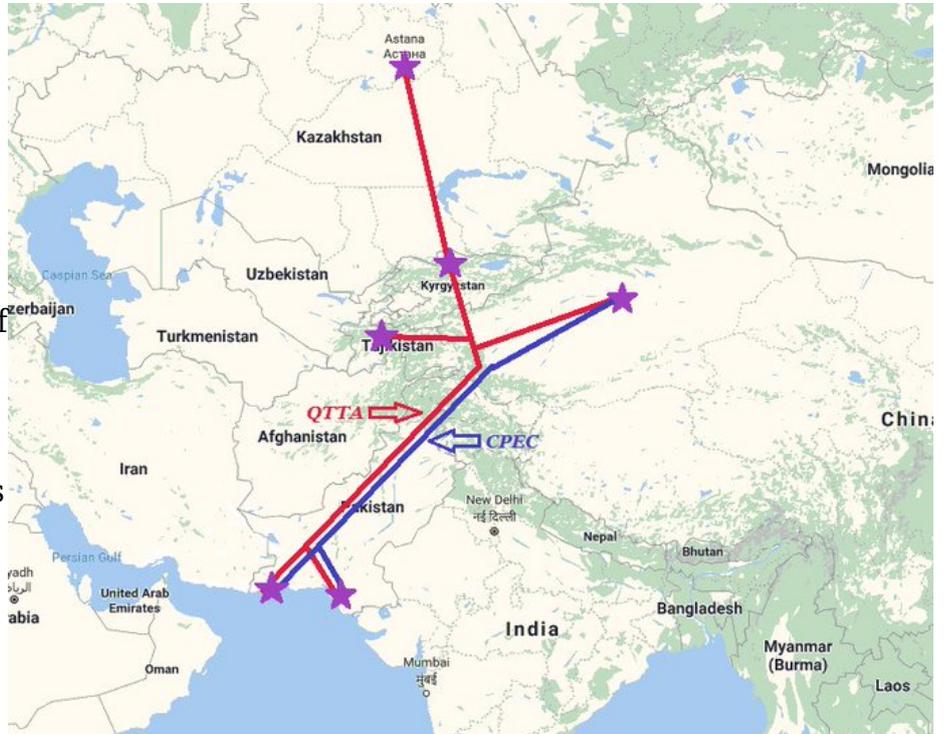
Geographically, Pakistan is close to Central Asia: for Tajikistan, the shortest route to the sea lies through Pakistan. So, the distance from the capital Dushanbe to the port of Karachi in Pakistan is 2720 km, while to the port of Bandar Abbas in Iran - 3400 km. Pakistan's leadership today hopes to turn their country into a transport hub for Central Asian countries. To reach the goal, the authorities develop the deep-water port of Gwadar, located in the southwest of the country in the province of Balochistan.

Port of Gwadar is already operational and facilitates Afghanistan's trade with the global markets. Pakistan is ready to provide access to Tajikistan to its seaports. "We are actively working with all stakeholders to facilitate the transit of Tajik goods through Pakistan," said Pakistani Ambassador to Tajikistan Imran Haider in an interview with Tajik media. [\[7\]](#)

Taking into account the fact that the transit of goods through the territory of Turkmenistan in recent years has been problematic for Tajikistan, which does not have access to the open sea, the route through Pakistan is a crucial alternative.

Tajikistan is the closest country in Central Asia to Pakistan, therefore, it is Pakistan's gateway to Central Asia. Pakistan is separated from Tajikistan by the Wakhan corridor in the north-east of Afghanistan. In addition to geographical proximity, both states have many historical, religious and cultural commonalities.

Pakistan and Tajikistan are members of various multilateral organizations. Both countries, with a majority Muslim population, are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC); it is one of the main elements of Pakistan's foreign policy aimed at developing ties with Muslim countries. Both states are also members of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process. Pakistan and Tajikistan have also become parties to another treaty known as the Quadripartite Transit Transport Agreement (QTTA), to which China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are also parties. Tajikistan's request to join the Quadripartite Transit Transport Agreement (QTTA) was approved in February 2017 and the agreement will enter into force once it is approved by the Tajik parliament.^[8]



QTTA scheme, source: <https://twitter.com/bhittanikhan/status/1258766102752002048>

This project is another indicator of Tajikistan's aspiration for a policy independent from Russia. Tajikistan is in no hurry to join the EAEU, which, according to both foreign and Tajik experts, promises Tajikistan great economic benefits and makes life easier for labor

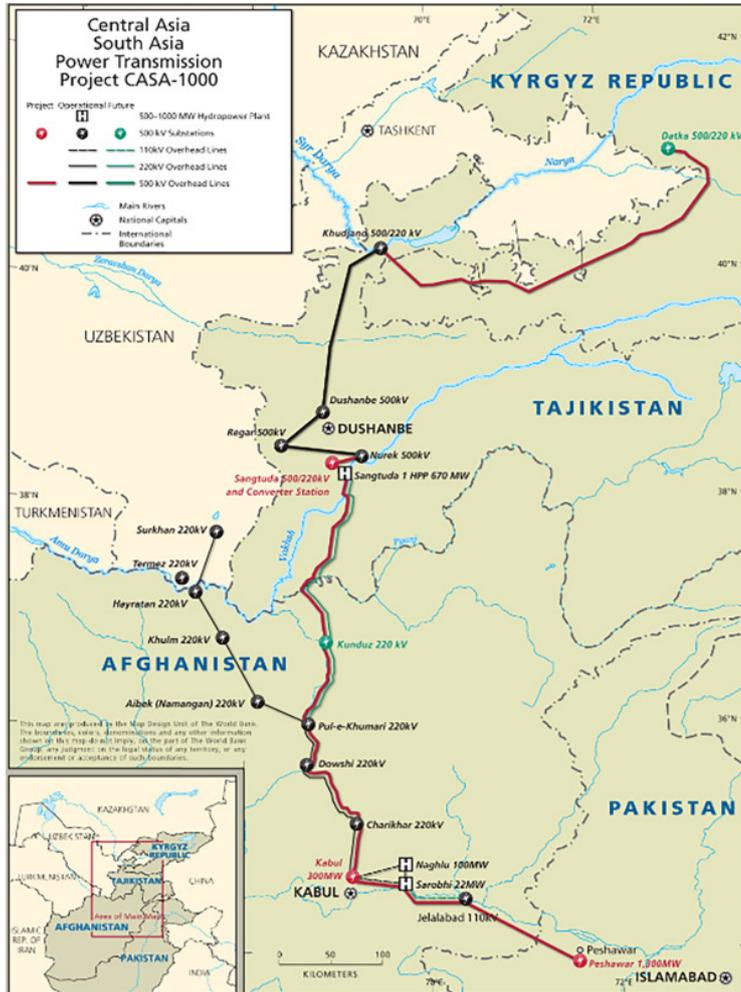
migrants in Russia, but we nevertheless joined the QTTA. Trying to enter into other similar agreements like QTTA or GSP + (EU Generalized System of Preferences), Tajikistan seeks to diversify its foreign trade directions and reduce dependence on Russian markets.

Pakistan is trying to become a major player in Central Asia. But in general, same as India, Pakistan alone cannot compete with China and Russia. Despite the rapid economic growth, this country itself needs cooperation with China. The military competition with neighboring India, which is many times superior in economic potential, the Kashmir issue, will hardly allow Pakistan to fully focus on strengthening its influence in the region.

CASA-1000

Currently, one of the largest joint projects between Tajikistan and South Asia is the CASA-1000 Regional Transmission Line Project. This is currently the biggest international project involving Tajikistan but without participation of Russia and China. Perhaps this is very example of Tajikistan's multi-vector policy. The CASA-1000 project includes a transmission line that will export electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

CASA-1000 is also of geopolitical importance for Tajikistan as well. It will allow Tajikistan to declare itself in the international arena as a country with a developed "green" energy sector. Once realized the project will be Tajikistan's manifest as an independent state, that can run international initiatives without supervision of big foreign players.



CASA-1000 scheme, source: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352484717303219>

Construction of the CASA-1000 project in Afghanistan and Pakistan is in full swing and is expected to be completed in late 2021. It is expected that changes made earlier to the project will enable Tajikistan to increase the volume of electricity exports to Pakistan and Afghanistan.[9]

According to these changes in the construction of a 500 kV DC transmission line from Sangtuda (Tajikistan) to Peshawar (Pakistan) in Kabul (Afghanistan), the converter substation will not be built. Pakistan will receive Tajik electricity directly. Thus, instead of the previously announced 1000 MW, Pakistan will receive 1300 MW of electricity from Tajikistan.

Tajik electricity in the amount of 300 MW will be supplied to Puli Khumri (Afghanistan) from the Geran substation (Tajikistan) through a 220 kV power transmission line, as provided by the agreement.

Experts confirm that the CASA-1000 project is unique and that both exporting and importing countries will benefit from this.[10] If the exporting countries receive good income, the consumer countries will receive clean and cheap electricity, which is greatly important for the development of economic relations and elimination of electricity shortages.

Afghan factor

In fact, economic and trade relations between Afghanistan and Tajikistan started mainly after the 2000s. Due to the unstable situation, the countries did not pay special attention to

them. Today the situation is more favorable. The countries are actively developing trade cooperation, which is facilitated by the construction of new bridges and crossings over the Pyanj River.

There are border markets near the border bridges, but these markets are not enough for large-scale trade between the two countries. Only in one market for one day a week, that is, on Saturdays, the turnover is 50-60 thousand USD. However, the possibilities of these markets are limited, having little to contribute to the economic growth.

For Dushanbe, the sale of electricity is an important source of income, and Kabul is one of the main buyers. The CASA-1000 project envisages the export of 300 MW of electricity from Tajikistan to Afghanistan. The vulnerability of this project is again security. In the northern regions of Afghanistan, armed militants often target critical infrastructure facilities, which include power lines.

If security is provided for each transmission line, then the final cost of the project will be much higher than the initial estimate, and, accordingly, this will affect the cost of electricity. Thus, cheap Tajik-Kyrgyz electricity can stop being so cheap.

The drug trafficking is another challenge. Unfortunately, at the moment, Tajikistan is forced to focus more on border protection than on developing trade with Afghanistan. Dushanbe is spending a lot of money on strengthening border patrols, which are still not enough to keep a screen against smugglers. Over the past couple of years, clashes with drug dealers have ended not only with the arrest of criminals, but, alas, with losses among the military.

Due to frequent incidents in the areas bordering Afghanistan, Tajikistan often has to close its borders, which also negatively affects the trade between the countries.

The internal instability of Afghanistan impedes not only the development of relations with Tajikistan, but also the establishment of trade and economic ties between Tajikistan and other countries of South Asia.

One of the shortest routes from India to Central Asia also passes through Afghanistan. But currently trade between India and the region is conducted mainly through China.

The situation in neighboring Afghanistan is the main stumbling block in the development of Pakistan's relations with the countries of Central Asia. The exchange of goods, the supply of hydrocarbons and electricity to Pakistan, the development of transport infrastructure can

only be successful if the situation in Afghanistan normalizes. Otherwise, most large-scale initiatives will remain on paper.

Conclusion

The unstable situation in Afghanistan and the conflict between India and Pakistan impede the full use of the potential of cooperation with the countries of South Asia, and therefore now South Asia cannot counterweight to the regional superpowers. However, Pakistan and India - two states with rapidly growing economies, favorable geographic location, military and demographic potential, have significant prospects for strengthening their presence in the region.

As for the Afghanistan issue, Tajikistan should think about working more closely on this issue with Pakistan and India. Since they are closer to Afghanistan, the situation in Afghanistan influences these countries more; therefore, they are much more interested in stability in Afghanistan than other powers (Russia and the USA in particular).

India, Pakistan and Afghanistan represent a huge market for Tajikistan. Due to its large population, there is demand for all types of goods, ranging from low and mid-range goods to expensive luxury goods.

Tajikistan can use the demographic potential of these countries to develop tourism in the country. To do this, it is necessary to launch regular direct flights and establish close cooperation between the relevant departments of all the above states.

Tajikistan is aimed at a multi-vector foreign policy and is taking steps in this direction. Tajikistan will unequivocally view South Asia as a whole as a foreign policy area and make efforts to strengthen relations and expand cooperation with these countries.

It is quite possible that with the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan, Tajikistan will have more opportunities for partnership and close relationship with South Asia. In the meantime, Tajikistan in its foreign policy seeks to balance between China and Russia.

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