

The fate of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan (TAT) railway is still unclear, although in terms of importance this project can compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

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For Tajikistan, the main goal of the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan (TAT) railway is an alternative route (road) for the above countries bypassing Uzbekistan. Seven years have passed since the signing of the agreement on the TAT project, however, due to all sorts of reasons and circumstances, the project has not been brought to its logical conclusion until now. Such circumstances include changes in the political landscape (the sudden death of Islam Karimov, the departure of Nursultan Nazarbayev from the presidency of Kazakhstan, etc.), as well as a sharp thawing of relations between some countries in the region (Uzbekistan-Tajikistan). Recently, both state and private mass media of Central Asian countries stopped covering and telling about the TAT project, although in terms of importance this project can compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

TAT as a counterweight to Uzbekistan?

93% of Tajikistan is composed of mountains and mountain ranges, which complicates transport communications both within the country and with neighboring states. Tajikistan, connected by its transport infrastructure with Uzbekistan since Soviet times, has always been dependent on Tashkent and did not have the financial ability to build alternative roads bypassing its neighbor. This advantageous position was used by the past leadership of Uzbekistan, headed by Islam Karimov. Every time "complications" began between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Tashkent blocked transport and communication routes for Dushanbe. This "crackdown" took place despite the "eternal friendship" agreement.[\[1\]](#)

The culmination of the deterioration in relations between Dushanbe and Tashkent was the resumption of construction of the Rogun hydroelectric power station in Tajikistan. Uzbekistan opposed its implementation in every possible way, fearing that the construction would change the flow regime of the [Amu Darya](#) River , which could negatively affect the water, food and environmental safety of Uzbekistan. In order to prevent this, the Uzbek leadership blocked the railway tracks through which they brought all the necessary materials and equipment for the construction of the Rogun HPS.

In this regard, Dushanbe began to look for solutions to the current situation. National strategies were created, where one of the main tasks was to get out of communication isolation (transport blockades carried out by Uzbekistan) and create alternative routes of communication between Tajikistan and the outside world. Further, access to international trade ports (Iran, Pakistan) through the opening and reconstruction of roads (road, rail and air communication) with other neighbors, in particular with China.

Thus in 2010, in his annual message to the country's parliament (Majlisi Oli), the President of Tajikistan E. Rahmon defined a strategy for the country's exit from communication isolation, in particular, the country's leader noted that "we strive to achieve this goal by building tunnels, bridges, modern automobile and railways, as well as air transport and communication infrastructure".[\[2\]](#)

In 2013, the heads of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan gathered in Ashgabat and signed a trilateral Memorandum of Understanding between Turkmenistan, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and the Republic of Tajikistan on the TAT railway construction project. The railway with a length of more than 400 km should run from the border of Turkmenistan through the Afghan settlements of Akina - Andkhoy - Shibirgan - Mazar - Sharif - Kunduz - Sherkhan - Bandar, reaching the Tajik Lower Pyanj and the Jaloliddin Balkhi region.



In 2013, the presidents of Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan signed a memorandum of understanding on the construction of a new railway, at a meeting in Ashgabat.

It should be noted that Tajikistan is unable to participate in such infrastructure projects without financial assistance from donors and international funds. For this reason, from the moment of gaining independence and up to now, all large-scale projects created and built in Tajikistan (Sangtuda HPS - 1 - Russia, Sangtuda HPS - 2 Iran, Dushanbe TPP - 2 - China, Dushanbe - Khujand - Chanak highway: China) were financed from outside, donor states or international funds (EBRD, ADB, IMF).

The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railway project was no exception. The Tajik section of the road was to be financed by the Islamic Development Bank. In particular, IDB President Ahmad Muhammad Ali, following the 38th meeting of the IDB Board of Governors held in Dushanbe from May 18 to 22, 2013, stated the following: “We are interested in the implementation of such projects that benefit not only one country. Turkmenistan has started the construction of its section of the railway. Moreover, in the near future we will get together and discuss the issue of financing the Tajik part of this railway”.[\[3\]](#)

In 2016, Turkmenistan completed the construction of its section to the border with Afghanistan. The total length of the new railway is 88 kilometers, of which 85 are laid

through the territory of Turkmenistan, and the final three kilometers - between the border points of Imamnazar and Akin - on the territory of Afghanistan. In July 2019, another section was opened. The Turkmen side has completed the construction of a 10 km railroad from the Turkmen border to Akina station. The construction of the route to the Afghan city of Andkhoy has begun.



In 2016, Turkmenistan completed the construction of its section to the border with Afghanistan. Photo: Reuters

However, in 2016, within the framework of a general thawing of relations with Uzbekistan, the situation for Tajikistan changed in a positive direction. Automobile, air and railway communication with Uzbekistan was restored, which radically changed the priorities of Dushanbe. Tajikistan postponed the implementation of the TAT project “till better days”, which caused a negative reaction from Turkmenistan,[\[4\]](#) especially the head of this state G. Berdymukhamedov. Subsequently, the Turkmen leadership took tough measures against Tajikistan.

Turkmen wrath

For Turkmenistan, TAT is of great strategic importance, both economically and politically. According to the Turkmen leader, this project is a huge achievement not only for the countries that built this railway, but also for the entire Asian region, where the TAT project “will connect Asia and Europe in the future.” However, discarding rhetoric, for

Turkmenistan, this project, firstly, could and can give the status of a center for regional transport communications in Central Asia, displacing Uzbekistan from the “throne”. Secondly, to enter the commodity markets and ports of Europe, China and South Asia. Third, to enter the race for leadership in the region, gradually moving away from isolation and the policy of “neutrality”.

Therefore, the fact of Tajikistan’s passivity within the framework of the TAT project could have irritated Ashgabat at the initial stages, and later the complete inaction of Dushanbe against the background of thawing of relations with Tashkent became a boiling point for Turkmenistan.

This pace of developments prompted the authorities of Turkmenistan from February 2019 to impose a ban on transit travel for trucks traveling to / from Tajikistan, thereby deciding to follow in the footsteps of their experienced neighbor in this matter - Uzbekistan, which for many years admitted, blocked and slowed down transit Tajik cargo and passengers through their territory. After that, a ban was introduced on the passage of freight rail cars in transit to Tajikistan.

Official Ashgabat attributes these actions to “security considerations,” but independent Turkmen analysts argue that Turkmenistan expresses discontent in this way and is trying to force the Tajik authorities to speed up the implementation of the TAT project.[\[5\]](#)

According to K. Kh. Zoidov, “the main reason for the restrictions was the delay by the Tajik authorities in the start of construction of the TAT railway, since the agreement on the construction was concluded back in 2013”.[\[6\]](#)

The construction of the Tajik section of the road has been delayed for several years, which has led to the discontent of the leadership of Turkmenistan. So, on September 22, 2018, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan expressed “misunderstanding” in connection with the statement of the Ambassador of Tajikistan to Uzbekistan Sodik Imomi that Dushanbe intends to postpone the idea of building the TAT railway “till better days”. “ However, the ambassador of Tajikistan to Uzbekistan mentioned in September that he had not said anything like that in an interview with Kommersant.[\[7\]](#)

The return of Tajikistan to TAT

On July 17, 2019, during a press conference in Dushanbe, the First Deputy Minister of Transport of Tajikistan Suhrob Mirzozoda made a statement, where he mentioned that Tajikistan and Afghanistan had reached an agreement on the construction of a TAT and by

the end of this year, Dushanbe would submit a project for the construction of its section. According to the First Deputy Minister, Tajikistan has already planned to send funds for the further participation of the country in the TAT project. At the first stage, it was planned to develop a Feasibility Study (FS) for the Tajik section of the railway. This work was expected to be completed by the end of 2019.^[8] S. Mirzozoda also stressed that the Tajik section will run through the territories of the Jaloliddin Balkhi and Pyanj regions and will connect with the Afghan Kunduz.^[9]

On December 30, 2019, the governments of Tajikistan and Afghanistan met in Dushanbe and signed an agreement on the construction of a railway on the route Jaloliddini Balkhi - Jaihun - Lower Pyanj (Tajikistan) - Sherkhan Bandar (Afghanistan). The agreement was signed by the Minister of Transport of Tajikistan Khudoer Khudoerzoda and the head of the Afghan Railways Department Muhammad Yamo Shams.^[10]



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There is no definite answer to the question why the Tajik leadership resumed the construction of the TAT railway. On the one hand, Dushanbe may have started negotiations and signed an agreement with Afghanistan on the route, due to pressure from Turkmenistan (ban on the transit of Tajik trucks, diplomatic notes), on the other hand, it can be assumed that the leadership of Tajikistan is considering the risk of repeating the isolation policy from the side of Tashkent in the event of disputable situations or the ongoing foreign and / or

domestic policy of Dushanbe, which would contradict the interests of Tashkent. For this reason, Tajikistan has decided to continue building the TAT and use this route as a useful alternative.

Now Uzbekistan is striving for regional leadership, and the new “liberal” foreign policy of President Sh. Mirziyoyev is one of the tools on the way to achieving this goal. In this regard, Tashkent is not delighted with the construction of an alternative road around the neighboring republics, therefore, the new leadership of the country will prevent in all possible ways and, if necessary, use leverage on the countries participating in the TAT project. However, unlike Karimov’s regime, Sh. Mirziyoyev will not “fight” and “crackdown” for neighbors, but on the contrary, Tashkent will deepen relations with Dushanbe and offer the “cheapest” options for routes (auto, air and railway) with different preferences for each country in the region.

The aftermath of long years of difficult relations between the countries may still have a negative consequence, even after the rapprochement between Tashkent and Dushanbe. Therefore, a scenario is possible in which Tashkent is likely to be able to repeat Karimov’s policy towards Tajikistan, which is still dependent on it.

Status quo

Situation at the border of Turkmenistan

It is not yet clear when the construction of the TAT will end. On July 15, during the conference at the Ministry of Transport of Tajikistan, the Minister of Transport Khudoyor Khudoyorzoda, while answering the question of the closure of the borders of Turkmenistan for the transit of Tajik goods and the fate of Tajik trucks that are stuck at the borders of Turkmenistan, noted that the situation is being discussed, however, there have been no clarifications from the Turkmen side on this matter.[\[11\]](#) As a result, the situation remains unresolved, despite the fact that Tajikistan announced the resumption of its work on the TAT project.

According to some reports, as of September 3 of this year, the authorities of Turkmenistan are still, without any explanation and reasons, not allowing Tajik trucks to transit through their territory. Now Tajik drivers drive along the alternative route Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan. Also, many people notice that this route is about 3000 km longer. Perhaps the Turkmen authorities are not confident that Tajikistan will actively participate in the construction of the railway. It can be assumed that until there are concrete results from the Tajik side, this policy of Ashgabat will continue.

What's next?

One of the factors hampering the construction of the railway was the unexpected appearance of the coronavirus infection. All states of the world have closed their state borders, including the Central Asian countries. Currently, each country is striving to prevent the spread of coronavirus on its territory, so states are taking tough measures to control the situation. It is worth noting that in order to resume the construction of TAT in Tajikistan, it is necessary to attract foreign specialists and professionals in this area, but so far these specialists are not willing to come, as they fear that the official statistics on cases and deaths from coronavirus may not correspond to reality.

Another question is whether the construction will continue after the pandemic (after the opening of the borders)? There are several factors and reasons that indicate that the TAT project will not continue.

- Looking at what is happening in the world today, we can safely say that in 2020 the borders of almost all countries of the world will be tightly closed. There is a high probability that the border opening can be expected in early or mid-2021.
- With the advent of the coronavirus and the closure of borders, an economic recession began in all countries of the world, followed by unemployment, inflation, a sharp increase in demand for food, etc. Tajikistan was no exception in this global chain of *coronavirus crisis*. It is quite understandable that with the spread of the coronavirus wave, along with the fact the Tajikistan is the poorest country in the post-Soviet space, in the medium term, the financial situation of the country will not allow building its own section of the TAT railway.
- As mentioned above, international financial institutions such as ADB and IDB refused to finance and provide loans to Tajikistan and Afghanistan for the construction of this project due to some reasons (the turbulent situation in Afghanistan, the difficult financial situation of Tajikistan). To the above, it should be added that the “arrival” of the coronavirus has become another factor for international banks to refuse in financing the TAT railway project.

Recommendations

Thus, based on all the above factors, opinions and analysis of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railway project, the following recommendations can be proposed:

- The government of Tajikistan needs to start construction of its own section of the railway project. The TAT project will turn into one of the alternatives for the country in

the worst of times, since the current improvement and rapprochement of relations with Uzbekistan may again lead to transport and communication dependence of Dushanbe on its northern neighbor in cases of deterioration of relations. Such a scenario is quite possible given the nature and essence of the Central Asian regimes and their leaders;

- With the completion and operation of the TAT railway, the Chinese project, Tajikistan will have its own lever of pressure, which, if necessary, can be used as the protection and promotion of its national interests;
- To build its section of the road, the government of Tajikistan needs to seek financial assistance from the government of China. Only China is able to provide Tajikistan with large loans at low interest rates and various grants, in addition, China is able to provide the necessary equipment and specialists. Tajikistan, in turn, can provide China with deposits of any natural resources (gold, silver, etc.) for a certain period in order to reimburse the received debt. This practice has been repeatedly used by Dushanbe as a method of “mutually beneficial” cooperation.

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[4] Knyazev A. A. Turkmenistan is building another “road to nowhere”. URL: http://www.ng.ru/vision/2019-09-29/5_7688_view.html

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<https://bigasia.ru/content/news/business/tadzhikistan-vozobnovlyaet-raboty-na-svoyem-uchastke-zh-d-magistrali-tat/>

[10] The basis for the implementation of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railway project is being created. Url:
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[11] Dushanbe has not yet received clarification from Ashgabat regarding the ban on the transit of goods. URL:
<https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30727936.html>



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