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Russia loses hold on Tajikistan pivot

By M K Bhadrakumar

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The simmering rivalries amongst Russia, China and the United States have begun bubbling up in Tajikistan against the backdrop of the uncertainties of the post-2014 period for regional security and stability. After months or years of secretive negotiations, Russian exasperation over Tajikistan's foot-dragging on the renewal of the lease agreement for its military base is surfacing.

However, the Russian-Tajik entanglement is more than a family quarrel, as it underscores the complex geopolitics of the post-2014 period in Central Asia when Western troops will have withdrawn from Afghanistan but the United States would still hope to keep permanent military bases in the region.

While the US intentions to expand its strategic footprints into Central Asia have not been a great secret to Moscow, a new factor is that China, too, is contributing unwittingly to the erosion of Russian influence in the region.

Leaving to the wolves

Russia has deployed more than 6,000 soldiers from its 201st Motorized Rifle Division in Tajikistan, spread among three garrisons in Dushanbe, Kurgan-Tube and Kulyab.

The current tussle is over the renewal of the Russian basing rights in Tajikistan, which expire in 2014. The Tajik base is a crucial template of the Russian security system in the Central Asian

region and it provides the underpinning for an effective future Russian role in Afghanistan. Dushanbe demands that the base can no longer be given gratis - Russia will have to pay rent - and, secondly, that the lease be renewed only be for another 10- year period.

Unsurprisingly, Moscow is indignant that Dushanbe is dictating terms at all, when the Tajik regime is vulnerable to the fallout from Afghanistan and cannot do without the Russian troops' protection. In the Russian eye, Dushanbe's perceived intransigence appears doubly illogical since the Tajik economy is highly vulnerable. The remittances by the 1.5 million Tajik migrant workers in Russia account for anywhere up to half of Tajikistan's GDP.

Russia is also upset that the Tajik government is behaving in a shifty manner, after having agreed at a meeting between the then Russian president Dmitry Medvedev and his Tajik counterpart, Emomali Rahmon, in Moscow last September to work out a 49-year lease agreement by early this year.

At any rate, the Russian narrative is that all this is attributable to the bazaar culture in Dushanbe. "Apparently, someone in this impoverished and extremely corrupt country is hell-bent on making a quick buck, and it could come either from Moscow or Washington, depending on who pays more for the right to have a military base in Tajikistan," Alexander Khramchikhin, director of the Institute for Political and Military Analysis in Moscow, wrote in a commentary featured by the Russian news agency Novosti.

These are harsh words, and the Central Asian leaderships are highly sensitive to personal criticism. Khramchikhin went on to ridicule the Tajik leadership's notions regarding the "unlimited power of the US military", since the US is on retreat inexorably in Afghanistan and Central Asia. He warned that the Taliban "will almost certainly return to power" in Afghanistan with the support of the Pakistani army - "perhaps with the direct involvement" of the Pakistani army - once US and NATO troops withdraw. He argued:

So, hopes for American protection make no sense whatsoever. In general, it is absurd to presume that the Americans will ever go as far as spilling the blood of their soldiers to help out [Uzbekistan President Islam] Karimov or Rakhmon. It is therefore clear that if Russian troops withdraw from Tajikistan, it will actually create a problem for Tajikistan, not Russia.

Evidently, Moscow finds it unacceptable that the US is secretly negotiating deals with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for basing facilities. Meanwhile, reports are appearing that Dushanbe might offer the Ayni airbase to the US. On Friday, a ranking member of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Dan Burton, while on a visit to Dushanbe, said after a meeting with Rahmon that Washington is considering Tajikistan as a base in the post-2014 period since it has the longest border with Afghanistan. Burton promised that the US would increase its military aid to Tajikistan in 2014. He said Tajikistan "is a key to regional processes" and plays an important role in ensuring regional security.

Things seemed to have come to a flashpoint when at a meeting of the Council of the CIS Defense Ministers in Kaliningrad last Wednesday, Tajik Defense Minister Sherali Khairulloyev maintained with a straight face that fresh negotiations on the Russian base are needed. He

pleaded he hadn't yet seen the Russian draft for the lease agreement (which was handed over quite some time back), and that Tajikistan was preparing its own draft for detailed negotiations with Moscow.

The chief of the Russian General Staff, General Nikolai Makarov, has said Moscow won't allocate any more funds for the development of the base in Tajikistan unless a new agreement is negotiated.

Moscow has indulged in some brinkmanship by stopping just short of holding out a threat to pull out its troops from Tajikistan and leave that country to the wolves. But Moscow is also unsure about Tajik intentions - whether Dushanbe is preparing the ground to get rid of the Russian military presence.

The Russian predicament is that it cannot question Tajikistan's prerogative as a sovereign country to decide what is in its interests. Second, Moscow cannot prescribe to Tajikistan not to have dealings with the US, since Russia itself recently agreed to provide the Ulyanovsk air base on the Volga as a transit hub for the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Third, Moscow cannot insist Tajikistan should continue to provide rent-free base when Kyrgyzstan insists on rent for the US' base in Manas.

Waking up to a dragon dance

The Russian officials have tried to frighten the Tajik side with the specter of an apocalypse following a Taliban upsurge in Afghanistan, underscoring that only Russia could act as Tajikistan's savior. But the Tajiks are unlikely to be impressed. They know Russia is loathe to vacate the base, as it would then be playing itself out of the Afghan chessboard. Besides, in the Tajik estimation, there could be other providers of security if and when the crunch time comes.

China is today as much a stakeholder in the security and stability of Central Asia as Russia could be. Beijing has big plans with regard to Afghanistan's natural resources, and Tajikistan is the gateway for China's transportation route from Afghanistan to Xinjiang.

China is building railway links via Tajikistan to connect Afghanistan with Xinjiang. Discussions have just begun between Beijing and Kabul to construct a transit pipeline through northern Afghanistan, which could be connected to the massive Central Asia pipeline that China built from Turkmenistan to Xinjiang.

The Afghan government awarded the first Amu Darya Basin tender last year to China's CNPC. The Chinese company is now performing field assessments and assessment of existing wells, and tendering for services. It has a commitment to produce at least 150,000 barrels of oil in 2012.

China is also expected to participate in the tender for granting oil concessions on the Afghan-Tajik border region, which Kabul is finalizing at the moment. Beijing is eager to boost incomes in Xinjiang and developing Afghanistan's resources and importing them through the communication links via Tajikistan will help accelerate the economic development of China's western region.

In fact, China Metallurgical won the contract for mining the Aynak copper deposit in Afghanistan by offering a US\$2.9 billion investment, outstripping the second-place bidder by 70%. The offer included construction of a rail line of up to 800 kilometers, a 400-megawatt power plant, a coal mine to fuel it and a smelter for the copper.

Simply put, China has high stakes in the geopolitics of the region, and the security and stability of Tajikistan in particular has become a top priority for Beijing. Unsurprisingly, China has stepped up its military cooperation with Tajikistan the recent years - the latest visitor from China was Chen Bingde, chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army.

During his meeting with Tajik Defense Minister Khayrulloev in Dushanbe on June 6, Chen said the overall development of China-Tajikistan relations have helped the "continuous progress" of military-to-military ties between the two countries. Chen was quoted as saying, "The Chinese side is ready to make joint efforts with Tajikistan to elevate the practical exchange and cooperation between the two armed forces in various fields to a new level."

Chen's visit coincided with the SCO military exercise "Peace Mission 2012", held in Khujand, Tajikistan, last month. A 369-strong Chinese contingent took part in the exercise, including army aviation troops. The PLA Daily described the exercise as of "far-reaching significance" for "deterring the three forces (terrorism, separatism and extremism) and maintaining regional peace and stability."

Again, during the SCO summit last month in Beijing, Rahmon paid a week-long visit to China, receiving a red-carpet welcome. According to the Tajik statement, various agreements were signed during the visit in the nature of a Chinese grant, concessional loans and technical assistance totaling around \$1 billion. The statement said,

Ten new instruments of interstate, intergovernmental and interagency cooperation in such fields as energy, industry, road construction, geology, agriculture, banking, television and radio communications and other industries were signed in the presence of the President. A number of agreements between public and private companies from China and their counterparts from Tajikistan were reached.

China will be building a big cement plant with annual production capacity of 3 million tonnes at an estimated cost of \$600 million in the Shahritus region in southern Tajikistan. The first stage of the plant with a production capacity of 1 million tonnes will be commissioned next year.

The Tajik leadership is conscious that China has by far outstripped all other external players in making investments in Tajikistan. Dushanbe has reciprocated Beijing's goodwill by concluding an agreement last year to settle Tajikistan's border dispute with China.

In sum, Russian experts have belatedly woken up to the reality that the ground beneath Russia's feet in Tajikistan has dramatically shifted in the recent years. In the Novosti commentary, Khranchikhin acknowledged that the Tajik leadership might well have "opted for the protection of Beijing." He concluded,

That would signal a whole new ball game and a new geopolitical reality. The Chinese political scientist Wu Sezhi said two years ago that "the creation of the SCO meets the political and economic interests of China in Central Asia and increases its influence over the former socialist republics. Their role as objects of geopolitical strategy for the United States and Russia is diminishing, and they are showing growing confidence in China."

Clearly, the rivalry between Russia and China in Central Asia is not just inevitable, it has already begun.

Playing catch-up

From Moscow's viewpoint, it is a bitter pill to swallow to see its little brother drifting away toward obscure friendships.

Yet the Chinese regional policy is not driven by any animus against Russia as such; on the contrary, its leitmotif is to keep the US out of Central Asia, something in which China and Russia have a convergence of interests. However, Beijing doesn't regard Central Asia as Russia's exclusive "sphere of influence" and is going about robustly advancing its strategic interests and in the process, paradoxically, it is augmenting those countries' strategic autonomy vis-a-vis Moscow.

China has a strong motivation to invest in the region, which is its immediate neighborhood. Neither Russia nor the US can match the Chinese investment or its level of interest in forging comprehensive partnerships with the Central Asian states. Equally, Russia and US cannot cope with China's "stealth power", which is unobtrusive and calm - and lethal. The point is, China can put a lot more in than Russia or the US and yet it doesn't need something out of it right away - unlike its competitors who are keen to realize returns on investment.

Thus, China is well-placed to meet optimally the rising national aspirations of the Central Asian states whereas the US can at best offer a transactional relationship and Russian involvement remains episodic, interspersed with unexplained periods of benign neglect.

China cannot be expected to stay out of Tajikistan in deference to Russia's sensitivities. Conceivably, the post-2014 scenario in Afghanistan will only prompt China to accelerate its engagement of Tajikistan in the field of security and military cooperation.

The only realistic policy option for Russia will be to follow Chinese footfalls and attune its own policies to the rising curve of nationalism in the Central Asian region. The Central Asian leaderships - not only Rahmon - have become adept at defining their self-interests and their countries' national interests and are today skilled enough in statecraft to determine what is in it for them in their dealings with external powers.

Russian policies, on the other hand, remain rooted in time past. It has run into the headwinds of Tajik nationalism. This was not a dominant political force in the recent decade but many factors have contributed to its revival and its increased appeal, as it used to be in the late Soviet and early independence days.

The principal reason for this is the hegemonic policies pursued by Uzbekistan, which relentlessly humiliates the Tajiks' distinctive identity and their ancient roots in Central Asia. The Tajik nationalists always harbored the grievance that Moscow practiced overt discrimination against the Tajiks in favor of the Uzbeks.

The Tajik perception is also that its Central Asian neighbors have exploited its raw materials. Last but not the least, at a time of great fluidity both internally (when local patron-client networks are once again on the ascendancy) and externally (when the 2014 drawdown in Afghanistan looms ahead) it is only natural that the leadership leans toward playing on nationalist feelings to enhance its position.

Besides, Dushanbe's attention is wandering lately toward the US playing catch-up with the Chinese juggernaut. It needs time to figure out Washington's recent flurry of engagement and to balance its ties to get the best out of China and the US.

The odds are that Tajikistan will choose to renew the lease for the Russian base on the basis of revised terms. But it will also have moved into China's orbit, thanks to Beijing's generous no-strings soft loans, which are desperately needed for development, military support and floods of investment from Chinese firms.

Tajikistan is on the way to becoming a "pivot state" against the post-2014 Afghan backdrop, traditionally close to Moscow but now hedging more toward China while exploring what leverage it can get out of the engagement with the US. The Tajiks are no doubt aware that Russia may again become a superpower, and the US still remains a superpower; but then, China is the unique resident superpower.