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## Russia, China, Iran close ranks in Tajikistan

By Olivia Kroth

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The Republic of Tajikistan, a comparatively small country with a size of 143.000 square kilometers, plays a pivotal role in Central Asia, just like its neighbours, Afghanistan to the south, Uzbekistan to the west and Kyrgyzstan in the north.

The population of this landlocked, mountainous republic is 80 percent Tajik, the rest either Uzbek, Kyrgyz or Russian. Tajik is spoken as the official language, but Russian is widely understood and used as well.

Russia, China and Iran are close neighbours and allies for Tajikistan. All three powers have a vested interest in keeping on good terms with the government in Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital, and Emomali Rahmon, who became President in 2004.

Furthermore, all three allies show great interest in keeping western meddlers and peddlers out. The meddling in internal affairs of Central Asian countries and the peddling of "democracy," western style, is not welcome, according to the motto "Asia for Asians."

Russia probably has the closest ties to Tajikistan, a former Soviet Republic from 1924 to 1990. When the Soviet Union dissolved, Tajikistan's newly gained independence encouraged China and Iran to seek closer ties with the small country as well.

In spite of its relative poverty, Tajikistan boasts a high rate of literacy, due to the Soviet free system of education. Almost 100 percent of the 7.5 million inhabitants have the ability of reading and writing, mostly in two languages, Tajik and Russian. The Russian Federation is taking great pains to augment Russian language schools on Tajik territory as part of its efforts to recover the post-Soviet space.

At the beginning of October 2012, President Vladimir Putin flew to Dushanbe for an official visit and wrapped up the deal to prolong the lease for the Russian military base in Tajikistan for another 30 years, until 2042.

His talks with Emomali Rahmon proved to be highly successful. Vladimir Putin came home to Moscow with the "trophy from the Pamirs," as the Indian analyst, M.K. Bhadrakumar, attested in the Russia & India Report. "It becomes an extraordinary occasion to celebrate life. Russian President Vladimir Putin couldn't have celebrated with happier tidings than these," he wrote.

The new lease will cost Russia practically nothing, as it is part of a package deal, profitable for both sides, a classical "win-win" situation. Russia agreed to deliver oil products for domestic consumption to Tajikistan without imposing export duties.

In addition, Russia promised to increase the legal and social protection for Tajikistani labour migrants in the Russian Federation, extending the deadlines for registration up to 15 days and the validity of work permits up to three years. Currently, there are 1.3 million Tajikistani citizens working in the Russian Federation. In 2011, they sent home almost three billion USD, about 50 percent of Tajikistan's GDP.

The package deal also specifies cultural, educational and scientific cooperation. Moscow State University and the National Research and Technology University have already opened branches in Dushanbe, the Moscow Energy Institute will follow soon. Almost 5.000 students from Tajikistan are studying at Russian universities, while the Russian-Tajikistani Slavic University in Dushanbe now has 4.300 students enrolled.

President Vladimir Putin expressed his hope that these numbers would grow, as knowledge of Russian could considerably expand Tajikistan's professional opportunities, especially for young people, helping them to find jobs in the Russian space.

Tajikistan's resources consist of hydropower potential and natural gas reserves. The country possesses the highest dam worldwide, Nurak Dam. Russia has installed the Sangtudin Hydroelectric Power Station, which produces 15 percent of the country's electricity. Gazprom-

Zarubezhneftegaz and Gazpromneft-Tajikistan are planning to construct a service station network in the country.

Total Russian investment in Tajikistan actually amounts to 1.2 billion USD. In 2011, Russian companies invested 133.6 million USD in the republic of the Pamirs. From 2010 to 2012, fifteen new joint ventures were established. All in all, there are 125 Russian-Tajik joint ventures in different sectors, from construction and retail to producing furniture and textiles.

The key, however, remains the Russian military presence. Russia's bases in Dushanbe, Kulob and Kurgan-Tyube are highly strategic assets, giving Moscow the capacity of influencing the shape of things to come, not only in Tajikistan itself, but in the greater region of Central Asia, too.

Having secured the prolongation of the lease for its military base until 2042, Russia emerges as the principal provider of safety in Central Asia, especially after the successful agreement with the Government in Bishkek on the prolongation of the Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan.

First success: Kyrgyzstan. Second success: Tajikistan. Not only did Vladimir Putin sign two new lease contracts for Russian military bases, but he made sure at the same time that no western bases will furthermore exist in these post-Soviet Republics. The western ex-imperialist base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan, will be closed in 2014. In Tajikistan, none will be opened.

The Russian President can be very happy and proud of this feat. "The trophy is all his, although he won it for Russia, since it was all personal diplomacy at the one-on-one level with his counterpart in Dushanbe, Emomali Rahmon," the Indian journalist, M.K. Bhadrakumar, emphasized.

Interestingly, both statesmen were born just two days apart, they could almost be twins. Vladimir Putin was born in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) on the 7th of October 1952. Emomali Rahmon was born in Kulob, Kulob Oblast, on the 5th of October 1952.

This is not the only point they have in common, though. Both men studied economics. Vladimir Putin holds a PhD degree from the University of Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) in economics. Emomali Rahmon graduated with a Bachelor's degree in economics from the Tajik State University in Dushanbe.

Their background and past experiences are probably similar as well, since both grew up in Soviet times, in the Soviet space, with the best of Soviet work ethos, serving their country with absolute

loyalty, great enthusiasm and an iron will. Both politicians served in several administrative functions, before being elected as presidents.

They are born in the Zodiac sign of Libra, which makes them excellent communicators, with diplomatic skills and finely tuned sensitivity for their counterparts. This was mirrored in the highly diplomatic language used on both sides during the final press conference in Dushanbe.

"I express my great satisfaction with our talks. I am sure that this official visit by the President of Russia, our friend, will open a new page in the rich history of our countries' relations," President Emomali Rahmon said.

President Vladimir Putin answered, "The President of Tajikistan, Mr. Rahmon, can take a lot of credit for the high level of interstate relations, the strategic partnership and cooperation that we have. He has done much to see the results in the agreements signed. Let me say a few words about our talks today. They took place in a very friendly, frank and businesslike atmosphere."

Obviously, these statesmen are masters in flattering, flowery speech, as could be expected from Oriental potentates. No haggling or squabbling, no insults and threats, as is often the case in the West. The Asian way of dealing with each other is considerate and complimentary, bringing about the best of results.

The Indian journalist of the Russia & India Report praised President Putin's "immense personal charisma among all Central Asian peoples and his reputation for being decisive. He enjoys excellent personal chemistry with the Central Asian leaderships, and his fame as Orientalist is unmatched among Russia's political elites, who are largely considered to be Westerners with no passion for the steppes."

After the talks, Vladimir Putin and Emomali Rahmon visited Russia's 201st Gatchina Twice-Red Banner Military Base in Tajikistan, which was awarded the Order of Zhukov by the Russian President. He fixed the decoration to the base's battle flag.

The 201st motor rifle division is one of the most combat-effective Russian divisions, consisting of 7,000 soldiers and three motor rifle regiments: the 92nd, stationed in Dushanbe; the 148th, in Kulob; the 191st, in Kurgan-Tyube.

Furthermore, the 998th artillery regiment and the 1098th air defense regiment are both based in Dushanbe, together with an air group of seven helicopters. Dushanbe also hosts the 670th air group with five Su-25 fighter jets, while a battery of MIRS "Grad" BM-21 is stationed in Kurgan-Tyube.

Russia has an optical-electronic complex "Oleno" in Nurak for outer space surveillance. It was designed to detect and identify space objects.

The Russian military and their families enjoy the rights of diplomatic personnel in Tajikistan. They have immunity against arrest, search and the confiscation of personal belongings.

With the signing of the new agreement, Russia's presence in Central Asia has acquired the final shape for decades ahead. Highly satisfied with the outcome, President Vladimir Putin presented Russia's latest sniper rifle to President Emomali Rahmon as a personal gift for his 60th birthday. The military nature of this present is obvious. It seals the successful military deal between the two allies.

Another major player is the People's Republic of China. The Chinese leaders are also wooing the little country in the Pamir mountains, due to its strategic position, bordering on China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Tajikistan and big sister China share a 500-kilometer-long border.

The Uygur Autonomous Region is the largest Chinese administrative division, spanning over 1.6 million square kilometers, an area about the size of Iran, with almost 22 million inhabitants who are mainly Moslems.

The region is a major supplier of agricultural products, especially fruits, such as grapes, melons and pears, but also of wheat, cotton and silk. It possesses large deposits of oil and minerals. In the 19th century, the region was noted for producing gold and jade.

Emomali Rahmon is just as friendly and obliging towards the Chinese leaders as he is towards the Russian President, with mutual visits between Beijing and Dushanbe going back and forth.

Hu Jintao, China's President, has met the Tajik President 13 times since 2003, assuring that both sides should maintain frequent interactions on regional and international issues of common concern. Chinese-Tajikistani cooperation touches the areas of agriculture, education, energy, infrastructure, sports, science and technology.

The two countries harbour medium and long term plans in farming, fishing, livestock breeding, processing of agricultural products and agriculture technology, a senior official of the Communist Party of China, Zhou Yongkang, commented. He visited Dushanbe in August 2012 to hold talks with the Tajik Prime Minister, Akil Akilov.

Both countries' bilateral trade has increased by 14 times between 2007 and 2012. Tajikistan has leased out 600 hectares of agricultural land in its south to a Chinese company, which is showing great success.

Chinese millions are flowing to the little neighbouring country continuously. Since 2005, China has disbursed 900 million USD to help Tajikistan build new roads, tunnels and electricity lines. In 2012, the two sides signed new agreements for Beijing to lend Dushanbe another one billion dollars. Of this new credit, 600 million will be spent on the construction of a cement factory in the south.

China's Zijin Mining Group has invested 200 million USD into gold mining in Tajikistan. The joint venture produces 1.3 tonnes of gold annually and shall be expanded to yield five tonnes per year by 2016. The Chinese National Petroleum Company (CNPC) is currently exploring gas and oil potential in Tajikistan, side by side with the Russian companies.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the third player involved in this region. Tajikistanis and Iranians are brotherly peoples, culturally and historically connected for 2.500 years. Both nations speak the same language, although the alphabets differ. The capitals lie 1.000 kilometers apart, but when their presidents meet, they do not need interpreters.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Emomali Rahmon lead the world's two majority Persian-speaking nations. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said, "Iran and Tajikistan are one spirit in two bodies."

When the Republic of Tajikistan declared its independence, Iran was the first nation to establish an embassy in Dushanbe and provided assistance to build new mosques. Iran's red, white and green tricolor flag served as a model for Tajikistan's flag.

Iranian culture - books, films, music and TV programmes - are widely popular with the Tajik people. They also celebrate Nowrooz, the Iranian New Year Festival. Iran provides language classes in Dushanbe to teach the Persian script, holds art exhibitions and has already transcribed 350 books from Persian script into Tajik Cyrillic.

During his last visit to Dushanbe, the Iranian President inaugurated the Iran Culture House. It features an Iranian restaurant, a book exhibition and displays Iranian clothing.

Sunni Islam is the official religion of Tajikistan. The government has declared two Islamic holidays, Id Al-Fitr and Idi Qurban, as state holidays. The population is 98 percent Muslim and two percent Russian Orthodox. Generally, the relationship between all religions in Tajikistan is amiable and tolerant.

There are no animosities between Tajik Sunni and Iranian Shiite Muslims, either. On the contrary, they respect each other as belonging to one big religious family. Muhiddin Kabiri, head of Tajikistan's Islamic Renewal Party, noted, "We are two peoples united by a common language, literature, history and religion, Islam."

On the 12th of February 2011, the Tajik Foreign Minister, Hamrokhon Zarifi, stated at an event in Dushanbe, while celebrating the anniversary of Iran's Islamic Revolution, "Today, Tajik society is witnessing the Islamic Republic of Iran's activity and role in the growth and expansion of Tajikistan's economy." He referred to projects like the Sangtodeh-2 power plant, the Anzob Tunnel and Istiklol Tunnel as examples of Iran's role in Tajik economy.

Both countries wish to revive the old Silk Road leading from China across Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iran to the Mediterranean Sea. Another joint venture project is a 500 million USD cement factory in Tajikistan's Khatlon province. Furthermore, Iran has spent millions on the development of hydropower in Tajikistan and is now planning to build a new hydropower plant near the Zarafshan River.

In 2011, trade turnover between Iran and Tajikistan reached 500 million USD. Another sign of their good connections are the daily flights between Dushanbe and Teheran, which are served by Iran Air, Iran Aseman Airlines and Tajik Air.

The multitude of undertakings and projects prove that Russia, China and Iran are closing ranks in Tajikistan, with the long term aim of blocking the Central Asian landmass against intrusions and interventions from outside.

Tajikistan indicated that it wants to join the Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. It has already joined SCO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which also includes China, Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The organization was founded in Shanghai, in the year 2001. Iran, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Mongolia attend the summits as guests with observer status. The official languages of the SCO are Russian and Chinese.

At the summit in Astana/Kazakhstan in 2005, the Kazhak President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, greeted his guests with the following words: "The leaders of the states sitting at this negotiation table are the representatives of half of humanity." This half of humanity can be observed as emancipating itself, growing together to defend and protect its homelands.

In June 2012, the SCO held military exercises in Tajikistan, dubbed "Peace Mission 2012." About 2.000 troops from Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan participated in

the drills, held at the Choruk-Dairon training ground, some 30 kilometers east of the northern Tajik city of Khujand.

Once in a while, some western media like to point out that the post-Soviet republics, including Tajikistan, are "flirting with the West." This could be true. Flirting, however, is quite a different matter from matrimony. One might flirt here and there, but will surely think twice before getting married.

A saying of the late Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin comes to mind, "The logic of circumstances is always stronger than the logic of intention." In certain circumstances it is pragmatic and wise to seek good contact and close cooperation with one's circumambient neighbours, especially if they are financially and militarily as powerful as Russia, China and Iran.

For those readers who cannot appreciate what Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin (1878-1953) had to say, here is a short poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), the famous German classic author, who formulated nearly the same idea, albeit a century earlier and in a more poetic way: