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Policy Brief

Tajikistan and the
Taliban-led
Afghanistan.
Pragmatism over
arrogance

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In late March of this year, the control of the Afghan consulate in the eastern Tajikistan city of Khorog in GBAO (Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region) was [rumored](#) to pass over to the Taliban government albeit, the main embassy's staff in Dushanbe are still operating under the former government's flag. Some [report](#), including Afghan Embassy in Dushanbe, about the Taliban government's representatives recent visit to the city. There was a further claim about "Khorog consulate issuing Afghan passports and staff were receiving salaries from the Taliban for the last [two months](#)". The recent statement by the acting head of the Afghan consulate in Khorog, [Naqibullah Dehghanzada](#), dispelled all these speculations and officially confirmed the transfer of the consulate to the Taliban control.

Although such a practicality has been extensively characterized by some media outlets as an unprecedented undertaking by the Tajik government towards acknowledging the Taliban government, it is seemingly less extraordinary event given Tajikistan has maintained the volume of [trade and economic cooperation](#) with its southern neighbor even though Dushanbe has not officially recognized the Taliban government.

Yet, as recent developments indicate, Tajikistan's rather icy stance towards the Taliban's de-facto government has appeared to be thawing though. Such a shift in relationship with the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan might have been caused by several reasons.

First, bilateral trade and economic cooperation seem to be the driving force behind such a subtle shift since, Afghanistan, at least for Tajikistan, is too huge market to be ignored. Total trade turnover between two countries reached \$111 million [last year](#) with the electricity being the main product that Tajikistan exported to Afghanistan. Total amount of [electricity exported](#) to Afghanistan was \$44.9 million only in the first half of 2022.

Second, the question of ethnic Tajiks regarding how the Taliban was/is treating them is seemingly not less important for Tajikistan considering [more than quarter](#) of the population of Afghanistan is ethnic Tajiks, according to Tajikistan's president Imomamli Rakhman though Tajik segment of the Afghanistan's population is [46%](#). Having said that, it is very important for Tajikistan to keep back door open (to have some level of limited

cooperation) in its relations with the Taliban to achieve what it professes for the [“power-sharing with all political forces in Afghanistan”](#).

Third, Tajikistan is interested in keeping some level of cooperation with the Taliban due partly to its probably the biggest insecurities – the terrorism threat. As we know, Tajikistan’s Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) shares long border with Afghanistan. Therefore, the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan has been increased ever since the Taliban took control over the country. Since the Taliban is the most powerful agent in Afghanistan, accepting the reality and maintaining some level of cooperation with it appears to serve the Tajikistan’s interests. In November, 2019, 20 masked people who are said to be the member of the terrorist organization called Islamic State [attacked](#) Tajikistan’s border outpost. The New York Times [reported](#) that at least five assailants were detained by Tajik border forces during the assault. Along with an existing threat posed by ISIS, in July 2022, the [reports emerged](#) about the newly established militant organization in the north of Afghanistan called “Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan”. All these slews of threats are likely to be pushing Dushanbe towards having more practical cooperation with the Taliban while avoiding any official exchanges and acknowledgments.

Fourth, Tajik-Afghan border has been a flash point with its rather unstable and informal characteristics in the relationship of both countries since the Taliban have taken over the power in Qobul. In May 2022, on the Afghan-Tajik border, there occurred an [armed clash](#) between the Taliban and Tajik border forces, which was said to be lasted for [four hours](#). Prior to this clash, the border area of Tajikistan was [“shelled from the Afghanistan’s territory”](#). This attack was later claimed to be carried out by ISKP.

Fifth, Tajikistan has long been heavily suffering from the excessive influx of refugees from Afghanistan. The fall of former Afghan government to the hands of the Taliban have worsen the situation even further. [According to UNHCR](#), in 2022 there were about 14 thousand refugees and asylum seekers came from Afghanistan. Interestingly, soon after the Taliban’s advancement throughout the country, Tajikistan, unlike its neighbors, was openly sympathetic towards accepting refugees from Afghanistan and did not oppose the border

crossings of the desperate afghani refugees. It even went further by [announcing](#) the readiness to accept up to 10 thousand refugees from Afghanistan. Little earlier, deputy minister of the Ministry of Emergency Situation of Tajikistan, colonel Imomali Ibrokhimzoda [said](#) while answering the questions from journalists that the country was capable of receiving and looking after up to 100 thousand refugees. One might wonder if why Tajikistan was so open to such a sensitive issue and spoke out about its real (or imagined) capacity in receiving such a huge number of refugees while almost all its neighbors publicly/privately [opposed](#) any flow of refugees. Maybe Tajikistan wanted to express its sympathy towards the collapsed former Afghan government by furiously opposing any advancement of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Whatever the cause was, soon after, Tajikistan government abandoned all its initial promises and started deportation of Afghani refugees from the country and [stopped](#) further receiving any refugees. Such conflicting actions – initial sympathy for hosting Afghani refugees, at least in its discourse, and later withdrawing from it – stimulate to speculate about Dushanbe preferring to float/walk through the fine line between fully shifting its stance towards the Taliban and hoping for the power sharing “saga”.

Sixth, drug trafficking from Afghanistan is one of the major problems which directly undermines the security of not only Tajikistan but entire Central Asian countries. In 2021, according to the official data from Tajikistan’s related agencies, the [“illegal narcotics they interdicted in 2021 increased by almost 69 percent year-on-year”](#). The head of Drug Control Agency of Tajikistan, Khabibullo Vohidzoda emphasized the [“evolving situation”](#) in Afghanistan as being an important factor for the rapid surge of drug trafficking through Tajikistan. Moreover, UNODC estimated that the opium production in Afghanistan in 2021 was [6800 tons](#) with 8 percent higher than it was in 2020. The report also concluded that the ongoing economic collapse in Afghanistan along with the deterioration of living conditions of millions of Afghans resulted in [increasing drug trade](#) among population which in turn, caused the rise of drug trafficking through Tajikistan territory.

Tajikistan was highly critical of the Taliban taking over entire Afghanistan along with the movement’s disregard to any power-sharing among conflicting parties. Tajikistan’s historic support to National Resistance Front bared no surprise. Tajikistan hinted willingness to

support the Panjshir based resistant group with its rather symbolic gesture – bestowing upon Ahmad Shah Massoud the Order of Ismail Somoni – as recent as 2021. The country went even further by allowing self-proclaimed leader of NRF, Ahmad Massoud, to give a keynote speech at the 10th Herat Security Dialogue held in Tajikistan’s Dushanbe in November of last year. With all these being said, Tajikistan’s pragmatism in relations with its southern neighbor has always been obvious as well as it has been more situational rather than static. Moreover, there were also [accusations](#) about corruption cases within the group involving Ahmad Massoud himself who is said to be getting profits from the funding the group receives from its supporters. Also, some accuse Ahmad Massoud of “[disclosing and sharing locations of martyrs including Akmal Amiri to Taliban](#)”. All these events seem to have been sounding on Tajikistan’s stance concerning Qobul.

Conclusion

Thus, Tajikistan has been apparently shifting its position towards the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan which is understandably a practical move considering the country needs some level of pragmatic relations with Afghanistan for addressing issues it is facing today. Also, expecting any dramatic changes towards putting any official labels on this status-quo seems to be not realistic. Thereby, maintaining a limited relationship with the current power in Afghanistan tends to be out of a sheer realism which stems from the contemporary challenges that I mentioned above.

So, Dushanbe’s current Afghanistan policy is not dramatically different from those of the other Central Asian Republics’ affair with the Taliban-run Afghanistan. Hence, Tajikistan has rationally chosen to simply follow the footsteps of its neighbors when it comes to the setting up the relations with the Taliban in Afghanistan.