

TALIBAN AT THE BORDER: A NEW REGIME NEIGHBORING TAJIKISTAN

by Mélanie Sadozaï



Taliban flag on top of the cross-border bridge in Darwaz (Badakhshan, Afghanistan), © Mélanie Sadozaï, July 2021.



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When the Taliban entered the Presidential Palace in Kabul on August 15, 2021, most of the northern border strip of Afghanistan had been under their control for over a month. By sharing approximately 1,344 km of border—the longest border shared by a Central Asian state with Afghanistan—Tajikistan has been at the forefront of the turbulence in Afghanistan for the past 40 years. The Taliban takeover symbolizes a historic landmark, as for the very first time, all the Afghan northern border districts are under their control.

In this paper, I suggest a three-scale analysis by focusing on the social, economic, and political resonance of the events unfolding in Afghanistan upon Tajikistan. First, I discuss the specific context surrounding the borderlands of Badakhshan to underline the historic nature of the Taliban's arrival there before looking at the socio-economic impact on local communities at the level of the border. Then, I focus on how actors within Tajikistan have responded to the arrival of the new regime in Afghanistan. Finally, I argue that Dushanbe's Afghan policy has put three crucial domains under stress. Ethnographic methods based on seven years of fieldwork experience along the border—including when the Taliban took control of the northern districts in July of 2021—and data collected in the Tajik and Dari speaking Internet sphere as well as local media provide the relevant tools for such a purpose. By looking at one precise borderland area, it is possible to understand the crucial role of Tajikistan in the future of Afghanistan, while highlighting the importance of international borders in times of crisis.



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The suspension of cross-border activities in Badakhshan

The historical background of a peaceful and resourceful borderland area

Badakhshan is the historical administrative province covering the eastern parts of the shared border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, shaped by the Pamirs mountain range. It is cut in half by the Pyanj River, marking the political border separating the autonomous province of Badakhshan—*Veloyati Mukhtori Kuhestoni Badakhshan* (VMKB)—in Tajikistan from the province of Badakhshan in Afghanistan. Historically, Afghan Badakhshan has always been spared from Taliban violence as they never occupied territory protected by the Northern Alliance,¹ even during their time in power (1996–2001).

This border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan used to be the Southern frontier of the Soviet Union that the Moscow authorities had shut down for almost seven decades to prevent foreign influence. Between 1936 and 1991, barely any contact took place between the two banks of the Pyanj River. The border became a reality for local populations who had never been separated in the past, even after the administrative line was drawn in 1895 by imperial cabinets to delineate Tsarist Russia's sphere of influence from that of Great Britain.

From the beginning of the 2000s, the borderlands of Badakhshan have been a symbol of intense cooperation between Afghanistan and Tajikistan and benefited from this peaceful state until the central government collapsed. The most visible and known elements of the bilateral exchanges are the cross-border bridges,² yet new infrastructure has been constructed to strengthen that cooperation; namely, markets, electricity sub-stations and grids, as well as schools, education centers, and healthcare centers on the Afghan side.³ Even though many international actors such as European governments, the United Nations, the United States, and other donors have been involved in funding cross-border projects, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) has been the main force behind implementing them. The AKDN is the largest employer in the border districts of Badakhshan, offering professional and educational opportunities for men and women since the beginning of the 2000s when it started operating in the Pamirs. According to data collected on the ground, its programs have been successful in improving the quality of life for Afghan border communities and providing jobs to Tajikistani citizens on the other side of the river; resources which are now damaged given the closed border situation.⁴

War-related insecurity only appeared in 2015 when the first shots were heard in the districts of Ishkashim and Darwaz. But the border area in Afghan Badakhshan remained calm, except in specific villages where Taliban fighters were opposing central government forces. Indeed, it was not until 2018 that parts of the districts of Nusai, Koofab, and Khwahan fell to the insurgency, although the

¹ Hermann Kreutzmann. *Wakhan Quadrangle: Exploration and Espionage during and after the Great Game* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), p. 239.

² Till Mostowlansky. "Building Bridges across the Oxus: Language, Development, and Globalization at the Tajik-Afghan Frontier." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 247 (2017): 3.

³ Mélanie Sadozaï. "The Tajikistani-Afghan Border in Gorno-Badakhshan: Resources of a War-Torn Neighborhood." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (2021), p. 1–25.

⁴ Gareth Price and Hameed Hakimi. *Reconnecting Afghanistan Lessons from Cross-Border Engagement*. (London: Chatham House, 2019); Sadozaï, Mélanie. *op.cit.* 2021; author's fieldwork (2014–2021).

District Administrative Centers (DAC) representing the local place of government power were spared. In July of 2021, the Taliban captured the entire border strip and took control of Sheghnan, Ishkashim, and Wakhan for the very first time. A few hours prior to this, more than 1,000 Afghan civil servants had crossed the border into Tajikistan. In the words of one Afghan from Sheghnan four days after they raised their white flag in the DAC: “They knew what had happened in other parts of the country, how could they keep small districts in remote Badakhshan if the bigger ones had already fallen?”⁵ The same man confessed that it was the very first time that people in his village of Sheghnan witnessed the fundamentalist fighters in person rather than on television.

The socio-economic impacts of a closed border regime

On July 5, 2021, when the Taliban took control of the districts of Eastern Badakhshan, the border had already been closed since February 28, 2020, to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Cross-border activities were thus on hold, leaving locals unsatisfied as they could no longer benefit from them. The cross-border markets were all shut down, forcing Tajikistanis to buy within Tajikistan for higher prices. For instance, a bottle of cooking oil would cost 20 somoni (US\$1,8) on the cross-border market sold by Afghan merchants, whereas it would cost at least 48 somoni (\$4,2) in Tajikistani shops. During my time at the border in the summer of 2021, the closure of the cross-border markets was a sensitive topic for border communities and government officials, who were all frustrated with the situation and could only find hope in the rumors spreading about a potential reopening.

This sharply contrasts with the time when the cross-border markets were open and offered a decent purchasing power.⁶ For Afghans, who used to be historic trading actors in Central Asia for the types of products they would sell,⁷ the closure of the border has also meant the loss of an important source of income. Moreover, a local employee of AKDN operating in Afghanistan explained that without the food supply delivered from Tajikistan through the cross-border bridges, people would starve, elaborating that “if they [border communities] get the food supplies from Fayzabad or Kunduz from the Afghanistan roads all the way to Darwaz, the cost would be four times higher, or five times higher but when they go through the Tajik road, it is closer and because it is asphalt, it’s paved, it doesn’t cost as much.”⁸

Impacts of a closed border regime is also felt in the medical sector, putting lives of Afghan border communities in greater danger. Through the Aga Khan Health Services (AKHS), providing programs operating under the AKDN umbrella, Afghan patients could be treated in Tajikistan, and Tajikistani doctors used to traverse daily to work in Afghan medical centers. With the pandemic, only four emergency patients managed to cross in 2020 as opposed to 54 in 2019, and 28 health professionals participated in cross-border study tours, compared to 175 in the previous years.⁹ This exceptional move at the border was the result of a process that involved the Afghan and Tajikistani governments at all levels and was motivated by the high degree of emergency for those patients. Since then, nobody has been reported traversing on either side, with the exception of a few

⁵ Author’s fieldwork, July 2021.

⁶ Author’s fieldwork, 2014-2019.

⁷ Marsden, Markus. *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants Across Modern Frontiers*. (London: Hurst, 2016), p. 77.

⁸ Author’s interview, July 2021.

⁹ AKDN internal document, 2021.

Afghans seeking refuge and truckers at the Sher Khan Bandar border crossing point (BCP) on the Khatlon side of the border.

While COVID-19 has triggered the closed border regime and the end of people-to-people contact, causing stress to local livelihoods, the rise of the Taliban has postponed a possible return to normalcy. In the Afghan border districts, healthcare workers are allowed to work only under the new rules that have been set. Women can still go to hospitals but they must wear a hijab or burqa. Moreover, those coming from far villages need to be chaperoned by a male member of the family, while those nearby can go to the medical centers themselves. Beyond the suspension of economic and medical activities, families living on both sides of the border are now prevented from meeting their relatives on the other bank of the river, as revealed by a local friend who asked me to “cherish the moments” spent with my family; “I miss those,” he said.¹⁰

The sudden change of political leadership happened just a few months after Afghanistan and Tajikistan’s representatives had signed a new bilateral agreement to boost their economic cooperation,¹¹ which has been frequent over the past several years.¹² The economic impact has already been felt less than a month after the Taliban arrived at the northern border and two weeks before they seized control of Kabul. Even before this, rumors about the Taliban advancing North were spreading along the border and resulted in a suspension of traffic. According to Customs authorities in Tajikistan, in January–February of 2021, approximately 50 vehicles would cross the border on a daily basis as opposed to two or three at best in July of the same year.¹³ Local construction workers at the Langar BCP (the last one built at the Afghan border) in the Wakhan corridor also justify delays in the opening of the BCP by instability in neighboring Afghanistan.¹⁴ The closure of this BCP has prevented the long-awaited connection between the Pamir Highway with Pakistan’s larger economic corridors; namely, the one traversing the Karakoram Highway.¹⁵

More importantly, the combination of the pandemic and the Taliban’s growing influence in Afghanistan has produced economic insecurity for local populations who are highly dependent on the Tajikistani labor force in Russia. As confessed by an inhabitant in the Wakhan valley on the Tajikistani side, times are harder now than during the civil war (1992–1997), which at least allowed the provision of vital goods with Afghans across the border.¹⁶ Not only have people in his town been deprived of money coming from Russia, but they cannot even rely on cross-border markets or Afghan contacts, as the border is becoming more militarized preventing people-to-people exchanges. In May of 2020, over a million Tajikistani workers were reported in Russia, as opposed

¹⁰ Author’s interview, September 2021.

¹¹ Asia-Plus, “Tajikistan seeks to further expand trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan, says Tajik leader.” *Asia Plus*, , March 31, 2021, <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20210331/tajikistan-seeks-to-further-expand-trade-and-economic-cooperation-with-afghanistan-says-tajik-leader> (last accessed on September 26, 2021).

¹² Jhanmal Zabiullah. “Trade Volume Between Afghanistan and Tajikistan Doubles.” *Tolo News*, 2017. May 27. <https://tolonews.com/business/trade-volume-between-afghanistan-and-tajikistan-doubles>.

¹³ Asia-Plus. 2021, July 30 “Transit of goods to Tajikistan via Afghan territory decreases dramatically.” *Asia Plus*. <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/economic/20210730/transit-of-goods-to-tajikistan-via-afghan-territory-decreases-dramatically> (last accessed on September 24).

¹⁴ Author’s fieldwork, June 2021.

¹⁵ Lena Jonson. *Tajikistan in the New Central Asia. Geopolitics, Great Power, Rivalry and Radical Islam* (London/New-York: IB Tauris, 2006), p. 86.

¹⁶ Author’s fieldwork, June 2021.

to less than 810,000 a year later, according to the Main Directorate for Migration Affairs of the Russian Federation.¹⁷

At the national level, for Tajikistan, the main source of income coming from Afghanistan is the export of electricity,¹⁸ and it is no surprise that this activity has not been put on hold as other cross-border activities have been. Electricity provisions in July–August of 2021 have increased by 56% compared to the same period in 2020,¹⁹ with the Ministry of Energy of Tajikistan even confirming that no delay in the electricity supply schedule had been reported.²⁰ Paradoxically, the BCP in Sher Khan Bandar outside VMKB in the province of Khalton has been operating under Taliban control.²¹ The Tajikistani authorities let the transit of goods vehicles operate on one side, while the Taliban collect transit fees on the other and ensure drivers that they can safely travel inland. This example clearly shows that Tajikistan is depending on cross-border trade with its southern neighbor. President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon is aware that Tajikistan's economy relies on cross-border trade with Afghanistan, despite holding a severe position against the Taliban.

Taliban resonance across the border: a fertile ground for Tajikistan

The consistent reactions in Tajikistan strengthening Tajik nationalism

Until the end of July of 2021, Tajikistan's position concerning the Taliban could be characterized as blurry with authorities remaining silent. Experts and analysts were even debating whether the lack

¹⁷ Mkrťčan N.V. & Florinská Ů.F. 2021. "MIGRACIÁ: OSNOVNYE TRENDY ÁNVARÁ-FEVRALÁ 2021 GODA" [MIGRATION: MAIN TRENDS IN JANUARY–FEBRUARY 2021], MONITORING ÈKONOMIČESKOJ SITUACII V ROSSII TENDENCI I VYZOVY SOCIALNO ÈKONOMIČESKOGO RAZVITIÁ [MONITORING OF THE ECONOMIC SITUATION IN RUSSIA TRENDS AND CHALLENGES OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT], 10(142), p. 18. <https://www.ranepa.ru/pdf/monitoring/monitoring-ekonomicheskoy-situatsii-v-rossii-10-142-iyun-2021-.pdf.html>

¹⁸ Edward Lemon. "Tajikistan Breaks From Neighbors in Policy Toward Afghanistan", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. September 10, 2021. 18(137). <https://jamestown.org/program/tajikistan-breaks-from-neighbors-in-policy-toward-afghanistan/> (last accessed on September 29, 2021).

¹⁹ Pajrav Čoršanbiev. "Tadžikistan za poslednij mesác postavil Afganistanu produkcíu na \$12,2 mln" [Tajikistan supplied \$12.2 million worth of products to Afghanistan last month], *Asia Plus TJ*. September 27, 2021. <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20210927/tadzhikistan-za-poslednii-mesyats-postavil-afganistanu-produktsiyu-na-122-mln> (last accessed on September 29, 2021).

²⁰ Pajrav Čoršanbiev. "Tadžikistan rezko uveličil postavki èlektroènergii sosedám. Afganistanu v tom čisle" [Tajikistan has drastically increased electricity supply to its neighbors. Afghanistan included]. *Asia Plus TJ*. August 25, 2021. <https://asiaplustj.info/news/tajikistan/economic/20210825/tadzhikistan-rezko-velichil-postavku-elektroenergii-sosedyam#commentslist> (last accessed on September 29).

²¹ Eurasianet. "Video appears to show Taliban controlling Tajikistan trade", *Eurasianet*. July 7, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/video-appears-to-show-taliban-controlling-tajikistan-trade> (last accessed on September 27, 2021); Kamila Ibragimova. "What does the Taliban's ascendancy mean for Tajikistan?" *Eurasianet*. July 9, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/what-does-the-talibans-ascendancy-mean-for-tajikistan> (last accessed on September 29, 2021).

of declaration by Tajikistani authorities should be considered as a sign of approval,²² very much in line with the well-known saying “silence implies consent.” However, after confirmation of total border control by the Taliban in late July, the government of Tajikistan shifted its position and has since made public statements condemning actions of the neighboring Taliban. At first, Tajikistan claimed that negotiations with the new power in Kabul would not be conducted.²³ Then, the Tajikistani authorities became even tougher, insisting on murder and violence towards civilians and former Afghan government members.

In a recent presentation organized by Harvard University, independent analyst from Tajikistan Zuhra Khalimova characterized Tajikistan’s position by the Russian expression “trust but verify” (*doverai, no proverai*).²⁴ In other words, for Tajikistan, trusting the Taliban is not and should not be automatic. The Tajikistani authorities also mentioned a more precise agenda, insisting regularly in official statements that they would not recognize the Taliban as the rulers of Afghanistan as long as they do not include non-Pashtun ethnics into the government. The last example to date was in President Rahmon’s address at the 76th session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on September 23, one day after his Foreign Minister, Sirojiddin Muhriddin, conveyed a similar message during a private meeting at the same event.²⁵ In his address to the UN, Emomali Rahmon stressed the fate of the Panjshiris and the Tajiks of Afghanistan by naming them clearly: “The Tajiks of Afghanistan, who make up more than 46% of the population of this country, along with other ethnic groups [...], have the right to hold a worthy place in the affairs of the state.”²⁶ However, the most symbolic moment was certainly the speech given by the President on the anniversary of the 30 years of independence earlier in September, as the text was published both in Tajik and in Dari on the President’s website in order to reach an Afghan audience.²⁷

President Rahmon thus distinguishes himself from his Central Asian neighbors to the point of even turning Tajikistan into the support base of the self-claimed resistance movement against the Taliban gathered under the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF), notably led by Ahmad

²² Kamila Ibragimova. “What does the Taliban’s ascendancy mean for Tajikistan?” *Eurasianet*. July 9, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/what-does-the-talibans-ascendancy-mean-for-tajikistan> (last accessed on October 4, 2021).

²³ Asia-Plus. “Dushanbe does not conduct negotiation with representatives of the Taliban Movement.” *Asia Plus TJ*. July 27, 2021. <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20210727/dushanbe-does-not-conduct-negotiation-with-representatives-of-the-taliban-movement> (last accessed on July 28, 2021).

²⁴ “The Taliban Takeover and Central Asian Security: What Will Russia and China Do?”, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. September 30, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JawCzPT1g00>.

²⁵ Asia-Plus. “Tajik Foreign Minister in New York called for assistance to Panjshir.” *Asia Plus TJ*. September 22, 2021. <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20210922/tajik-foreign-minister-in-new-york-called-for-assistance-to-panjshir> (last accessed on September 24, 2021).

²⁶ “Sukhanroni dar mubohisaho-i umumi-i Ijlos-i 76-um-i Majma-i Umumi-i Sozmon-i Milal-i Muttahid” [Speech at the general debates of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly]. *President.tj*. September 24, 2021. <http://president.tj/node/26687> (last accessed on September 27, 2021).

²⁷ In Tajik: “Sukhanroni dar jalasa-i botantana ba munosibat-i 30 solagi-i istiqlol-i davlati” [Speech at the solemn meeting on the occasion of the 30 years anniversary of the independence of the State]. *President.tj*. September 8, 2021. <http://president.tj/node/26483> (last accessed on September 24, 2021); In Dari: “Sokhanraani-i president-i jomhuri-i Taajikestaan, pishva-i mellat mohtaram Emaam’ali Rahmaan dar jalasa-i baatantana ba monaasebat-i 30 saalagi-i esteqlaal-i davlati [Speech of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, leader of the nation, respectable Emomali Rahmon at the solemn meeting on the occasion of the 30 years anniversary of the independence of the State]. *President.tj*. September 8, 2021. <http://president.tj/en/node/26486> (last accessed on September 24, 2021).

Massud. The symbol of that resistance in Tajikistan is embodied by Zahir Aghbar, ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Dushanbe. In a recent interview given to *Asia Plus*,²⁸ Aghbar answered a question about the future organization of a “Great Resistance Council” (in Tajik and Dari: *shuri bozorg-i muqowimat*) by underlining that it would be open to all individuals “who have contributed to Afghanistan’s liberation in the previous years.”²⁹ Ambassador Aghbar was the first Afghan diplomat to condemn Ashraf Ghani’s escape and accused him of stealing millions of public money, while he also pledged allegiance to Vice-President Amrullah Saleh.³⁰

By displaying his effective presence in Tajikistan and regularly condemning the Taliban’s actions in local media, Aghbar has made it clear that Tajikistan is a safe place for former diplomats and Afghans who reject the Taliban regime. The fact that Tajikistan is allowing Aghbar to make public statements against the Taliban and to openly support the NRF also shows that the country has become an area of anti-Taliban resistance akin to the 1990s when Tajikistan supported Ahmad Shah Massud’s Northern Alliance. The Tajikistani authorities do not hide their support to anti-Taliban militants, and they now regularly underline the humanitarian crisis taking place in Panjshir.³¹ The first major sign of support was conveyed only two weeks after the Taliban took control of Kabul, when the government of Tajikistan granted the late Ahmad Shah Massud and Borhanuddin Rabbani, leaders of the Northern Alliance, with the Order of Ismoil Somoni, one of the highest distinctions in Tajikistan.³²

This narrative works well for the intelligentsia in Tajikistan, who see the Taliban as a Pashtun-oriented group seeking to oppress Tajiks, as well as for the Tajikistani civil society. The government’s narrativization of the conflict in Afghanistan thus plays a role in reinforcing Tajik nationalism, largely displayed in late August in the Khatlon province on the western side of the border, with a group composed of hundreds of men offering to fight alongside the resistance in Afghanistan. They wrote an open letter to the President of Tajikistan, requesting permission to join

²⁸ Asia-Plus. “Safiri Afghoniston: ‘Tolibon’ omoda nestand bo tojikon sari mizi guftushonid nishinannd” [Ambassador of Afghanistan: ‘Taliban’ are not ready to sit at the negotiation table with Tajiks”. *Asia Plus TJ*. September 24, 2021. <https://asiaplustj.info/tj/news/world/20210924/safiri-afoniston-tolibon-omoda-nestand-bo-toikon-sari-mizi-guftushonid-nishinand> (last accessed on September 27, 2021).

²⁹ Author’s translation from Tajik.

³⁰ Kamila Ibragimova. “Interview: Afghanistan’s ambassador to Tajikistan rejects Taliban rule.” *Eurasianet*. August 18, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/interview-afghanistans-ambassador-to-tajikistan-rejects-taliban-rule> (last accessed on October 1, 2021).

³¹ Asia-Plus. “Emomali Rahmon called on the international community to provide assistance to the besieged Panjshir.” *Asia Plus TJ*. September 17, 2021. <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/centralasia/20210917/emomali-rahmon-called-on-the-international-community-to-provide-assistance-to-the-besieged-panjshir> (last accessed on September 30, 2021).

³²“FARMONI PREZIDENTI JUMHURII TOJIKISTON Dar borai sarfarozgardonii sobiq vaziri mudofiai Jumhurii Islomii Afghoniston, Qahramoni millii Afghoniston Ahmadshohi Mas’ud bo ordeni Ismoil Somoni darajai” [DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TAJIKISTAN in regards of awarding former Minister of Defense of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, National hero of Afghanistan Ahmadshah Massud with the grade Order of Ismoil Somoni]. *President.tj*. September 2, 2021. <http://president.tj/node/26449> (last accessed on October 4, 2021); “FARMONI PREZIDENTI JUMHURII TOJIKISTON Dar borai sarfarozgardonii sobiq Prezidenti Jumhurii Islomii Afghoniston, profesor Burhoniddini Rabboni bo ordeni Ismoil Somoni darajai” [DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TAJIKISTAN in regards of awarding former President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, professor Burhoniddin Rabboni with the grade Order of Ismoil Somoni]. *President.tj*. September 2, 2021. <http://president.tj/node/26448> (last accessed on October 4, 2021).

anti-Taliban forces in the Panjshir valley.³³ In early November, I was discussing the situation with a friend from Ishkashim, who told me he was ready to fight too, like many people in his town. When I asked him why he did not cross the border, just a few meters away from his house, to join the resistance in Afghanistan, he told me that he was just waiting for the Tajikistani authorities to give the green light.

On September 13, dozens of Tajikistanis gathered in New York, calling for support for the resistance in Panjshir while holding Tajikistan's national flag.³⁴ A few days later, a video was shared on Twitter showing Tajikistan MMA fighter Samandar Morad shouting in Russian "Ahmad Massud, patience, my brother" (in Russian: *Ahmad Masud, terpenie, brat moi*) as he and members of his team were wearing shirts with Ahmad Shah Massud's and his son's portraits printed on them, along with the flag of Tajikistan on Morad's shoulders.³⁵ Those few examples highlight a sense of the Tajik nationalism also resonating among Tajikistanis who consider that the fight of the NRF against the Taliban is also their duty to defend a common identity.

While Tajik nationhood has always been spurred by grievances, particularly due to the loss of Samarkand and Bukhara to Uzbekistan, the current situation in Afghanistan has become the new source of motivation to fight for preserving the Tajik identity. By underscoring the fate of Panjshiris in particular, and Tajiks of Afghanistan in general, President Rahmon is breaking from the traditional nationbuilding narrative built on historical references such as the praise of Zoroastrianism or the rehabilitation of an Aryan identity.³⁶ Tajik ethnonationalism as now articulated by the President of Tajikistan gives a sense of Tajik national consciousness within the country but also among the Tajik diaspora. With no surprise, this finds a positive echo among the Tajiks of Afghanistan: for instance, on an Afghan blog, a poem in Dari was dedicated to President Rahmon, considered as the "leader of the Tajiks of the world." The poem emphasizes the Tajik identity that is shattering all national borders that divide the Tajiks between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.³⁷ Tajikistan has now become the "Taliban's toughest critic,"³⁸ which has allowed President Rahmon to leverage the situation in Afghanistan to strengthen ethnonationalism while also attracting international attention.

³³ RFE/RL's Tajik Service. "Tajik Group Offers To Fight Alongside Anti-Taliban Militias In Afghanistan." *Gandhara*. August 27, 2021. <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-tajikistan-volunteers-anti-taliban-militia/31431732.html> (last accessed on September 30, 2021).

³⁴ Asia-Plus. "Tajiks hold rally in New York against Taliban actions in Panjshir", *Asia Plus TJ*. September 13, 2021. <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/society/20210913/tajiks-hold-rally-in-new-york-against-taliban-actions-in-panjshir> (last accessed on September 14, 2021).

³⁵ Kolabi, Fahim (@ibnSamani). "Tajikistan MMA fighter Samandar Morad with his team return in the ring wearing Commander Massoud and Ahmad Massoud's shirt, to celebrate winning against his Russian opponent." Tweet. September 18, 2021, 4:36pm. <https://twitter.com/ibnSamani/status/1439237018265944069> (last accessed on September 18, 2021).

³⁶ Laruelle, Marlène. *Central Peripheries. Nationhood in Central Asia* (London: UCL Press, 2021), p. 64–80.

³⁷ Homayung. "Peshvo wa rahbar-i taajekaan-i jahaan" [Meneur et chef des Tadjiks du monde], *Homayun.org*. September 25, 2021. <https://homayundotorg.wordpress.com/2021/09/25/%d9%be%db%8c%d8%b4%d9%88%d8%a7-%d9%88-%d8%b1%d9%87%d8%a8%d8%b1-%d8%aa%d8%a7%d8%ac%db%8c%da%a9%d8%a7%d9%86-%d8%ac%d9%87%d8%a7%d9%86/> (last accessed September 29, 2021).

³⁸ Bruce Pannier. "Tajikistan: The Taliban's Toughest Critic." *Gandhara*. September 13, 2021. <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-taliban-relations/31458364.html> (last accessed on September 13, 2021).

Tajikistan's newly acquired position on the world stage

Tajikistan has managed to hold a narrative and a position which work well domestically but also internationally. First, at the regional level, the border with Afghanistan has been at the forefront of recent official meetings. On September 16 and 17, 2021, under the chairmanship of President Rahmon, the Chinese-backed Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) jubilee summit took place in Dushanbe, gathering the heads of state of its members. At the same time, member-states of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) also met in the Tajikistani capital. Both regional security blocs' focus was dominated by the situation in Afghanistan and along the Central Asian borders.

However, the impact of these alliances should not be overestimated. As Markey argues regarding the SCO, "the organization remains weak and has been frequently hamstrung by poor relations among its members," and mainly serves as "little more than a clearinghouse for terrorist 'watch lists' used by member states' security agencies."³⁹ On top of this, Tajikistan's stance on the Taliban regime irritates Russia and sharply contrasts with China's take, openly supporting the political change in Kabul. Apart from agreeing on joint military drills, reaffirming defense cooperation mechanisms, and calling for a boost of international aid to Afghanistan,⁴⁰ major achievements have not been met. All in all, those summits have served as window dressings for Tajikistan, whose border with Afghanistan came to the center of regional attention.

Further, the Tajikistani authorities' regular declarations against the Taliban work well internationally, as they meet the West's position on the new regime in Afghanistan. By hosting the strongest movement of resistance in exile, notably through the presence of Aghbar, Tajikistan is positioning itself as a key player in possible negotiations with the Taliban, and potentially for international actors who would either end up holding talks with them or openly supporting the NRF. On the occasion of Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Dushanbe, Tajikistan's president suggested "facilitat[ing] negotiations between the Taliban and the Tajiks."⁴¹ Here, as Prime Minister Imran Khan declared, the role of Pakistan will be crucial in order to open a canal with the Taliban: "After meetings in Dushanbe with leaders of Afghanistan's neighbours and especially a lengthy discussion with Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon, I have initiated a dialogue with the Taliban for an inclusive Afghan government to include Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks."⁴²

Through its implication in the situation in Afghanistan, Tajikistan could easily seek a diversification of partners to assist the country in various domains—mainly around financial support—to

³⁹ Daniel S. Markey. *China's Western Horizon. Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia* (Oxford/New-York: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 92.

⁴⁰ RFE/RL's Tajik Service. "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Leaders Call For Increased Afghan Aid, Unfreezing Of Assets." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. September 17, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/shanghai-cooperation-organization-leaders-meet-in-dushanbe-with-afghanistan-in-focus/31464928.html> (last accessed on October 3, 2021).

⁴¹ "Sukhanroni dar nishasti matbuoti pas az muzokiroti bo sarvaziri Jumhurii Islomii Pokiston Imron Khon" [Speech at press conference after talks with Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Imran Khan], *President.tj*. September 17, 2021. <http://president.tj/node/26546> (last accessed October 1, 2021).

⁴² Baqir Sajjad Syed. "PM speaks to Emomali to defuse Tajikistan's tension with Taliban." *Dawn*. October 3, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1649826/pm-speaks-to-emomali-to-defuse-tajikistans-tension-with-taliban> (last accessed on October 4, 2021).

compensate for the economic and military dependence on China and Russia. President Rahmon is clearly acting on the “open doors” policy (in Tajik: *darho-yi kushoda*), the official foreign policy guideline of the Presidency of Tajikistan as coined already in 2002.⁴³ He is also potentially fulfilling an important achievement internationally, more than two decades after beginning his own rule of Tajikistan. Despite his tight stance on the Taliban and the fact that he has managed to capitalize on the common border with the new Taliban regime, his Afghanistan policy is far from being sustainable for three reasons, as discussed below.

Tajikistan’s risky gamble

Security concerns

By using strong words against the Taliban on a regular basis, Tajikistan is placing a risky bet. The main concern for the government in Dushanbe regarding the Afghan border is security related. The threat does not emanate from the Taliban directly; rather, it comes from the Central Asian nationals who pledged alliance to them and whose actions against their native country remain unpredictable, especially since the degree of control the Taliban have over them is unknown.

Jamaat Ansarullah, a Taliban affiliated group hosting Tajikistani nationals and considered a terrorist organization in Tajikistan, has for instance been known to be in charge of the following border districts since the end of July: Kuf Ab, Khwahan, Maimay, Nusay, and Shekay, all located in the Badakhshan province.⁴⁴ More precisely, Mohammad Sharifov, a citizen of Tajikistan, is said to be governing those five districts. Reports now seem to show that Sharifov did travel to Kabul after its capture by the Taliban, most likely for consultations with the new de facto leaders of Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Under his command, many Central Asian citizens who hold grievances against their country of origin have been trained in Syria and Iraq.

On the diplomatic front, the Taliban consider Dushanbe’s verbal attacks as meddling in their affairs.⁴⁶ Most likely to deter Tajikistan from any military moves, the Taliban have put together a suicide battalion in Fayzabad, the capital of Badakhshan, near the Tajikistani border,⁴⁷ which was

⁴³ Emomali Rahmon. *Nezavisimost’ Tadjikistana i vozrojdienie natsii. Tom 5 [The independence of Tajikistan and the revival of the nation. Tom 5]* (Dushanbe: Irfon, 2006), p. 40.

⁴⁴ Mumin Ahmadi, Mullorajab Yusufi and Nigorai Fazliddin. “Exclusive: Taliban Puts Tajik Militants Partially In Charge Of Afghanistan’s Northern Border.” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. July 27, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-tajik-militants-border/31380071.html> (last accessed October 3, 2021).

⁴⁵ RFE/RL’s Tajik Service. “Tajik Authorities Concerned About Taliban Plots To Infiltrate From Afghanistan.” *Gandhara*. September 25, 2021. <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-concerned-taliban-plots/31477876.html> (last accessed on October 3, 2021).

⁴⁶ BBC Farsi. “Taalebān: Taajikestaan dar omour-i maa modaakhela mikonad” [Taliban: Tajikistan is interfering in our affairs], *BBC*. September 26, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-58698389> (last accessed on September 27).

⁴⁷ Homayung. “Tashkil-i kandakhaa-i entehaari-i taaleban dar shamaal rasman ijaad shod” [The formation of Taliban suicide battalions was officially established in the North]. *Homayun.org*. September 22, 2021. <https://homayundotorg.wordpress.com/2021/09/22/%d8%aa%d8%b4%da%a9%db%8c%d9%84-%da%a9%d9%86%d8%af%da%a9-%d9%87%d8%a7%db%8c-%d8%a7%d9%86%d8%aa%d8%ad%d8%a7%d8%b1%db%8c->

confirmed by local Badakhshanis,⁴⁸ and displayed a few days later by Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban's Deputy Minister for information and broadcasting.⁴⁹ Mujahid specified that those special forces were dispatched in the province of Takhar, neighboring Badakhshan to the west and also bordering Tajikistan. This force could be mobilized against local uprisings, and communication about this deployment by Mujahid, claiming that "tens of thousands of special forces" were deployed, is likely to be propaganda. Still, the deployment at the northern border should be understood as a means for the Taliban to pressure Tajikistan by showing off their own forces and to make Dushanbe more accommodating, especially since Tajikistani border guards feel threatened.⁵⁰

A direct war between Tajikistan and the Taliban is not likely to happen given that Tajikistan is intensely backed by Russia's military along the border as well as that of China, with whom regular drills have been conducted since 2016. CSTO members are also committed to protecting Tajikistan's territorial sovereignty according to Article 3 of the Charter of the Organization, and joint military exercises have increased since the Summer of 2021 amid security concerns at the Afghan border. Moscow has tried to temper all actors, urging Tajikistan and Afghanistan to "seek mutually acceptable options to resolve the current situation," to quote Alexei Zaitsev, Deputy Director of the Information Department within the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁵¹

Indeed, a limit posed to Dushanbe's rhetoric against the Taliban is Russia's position, Tajikistan's strongest defense ally, whose presence in Tajikistan has precisely been motivated by the prevention of a regional spillover from Afghanistan. Although, any analyses or predictions have to be carefully balanced. Looking at the situation from the Taliban's own perspective remains crucial, and as Tajikistani political scientist Parviz Mullojanov argues, according to their own point of view, they defeated 200,000 coalition troops, 300,000 Afghan army and policemen, and captured the country without resistance, all thanks to divine assistance. In such worldview, Mullojanov continues: "30,000 Tajik soldiers and a 6,000-strong Russian base might not seem that much of a problem."⁵² Even if it is hard to assess how the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan could inspire fundamentalists across the border, that does not mean the risk should be downplayed.

%d8%b7%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%86-%d8%af%d8%b1-%d8%b4%d9%85%d8%a7%d9%84-%d8%b1/ (last accessed on September 28, 2021).

⁴⁸ Author's interview, September 2021.

⁴⁹ Mujahid, Zabihullah. "Dozens of special forces of the Islamic Emirate's Mansoori Army were deployed in Takhar to eliminate security and other potential threats." Tweet. September 25, 2021, 11:04am. https://twitter.com/Zabihullah_M3/status/1441689977184792578 (last accessed on October 1, 2021).

⁵⁰ Mumin Ahmadi. "Istočniki: «Ansorullah» gotovit napadenie na Tadžikistan. Tadžikskie siloviki perevedeny v režim povyšenoj gotovnosti" [Sources: 'Ansorullah' is preparing an attack on Tajikistan. Tajik security forces are put on high alert]. *Radio Ozodi*. September 24, 2021. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31379490.html> (last accessed October 4, 2021).

⁵¹ Radio Ozodi. "V Moskve obespokoeny narastaniem naprâžennosti v tadžiksko-afganskikh otnošeníâh - MID Rossii" [Moscow is concerned about the growing tension in Tajik-Afghan relations - Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. October 1, 2021. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31486168.html> (last accessed on October 1, 2021).

⁵² Parviz Mullojanov. Facebook post. September 28, 2021.

<https://www.facebook.com/parviz.mullojanov/posts/557354902015248> (last accessed on October 4, 2021), author's translation from Russian.

Economic stress

Second, at the economic level, Tajikistan needs to export its electricity across the border and continue developing large-scale projects. In this first section, I have outlined the socio-economic consequences of the current situation in Afghanistan on border communities in Badakhshan that depend on the cooperation between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Large-scale projects involving the two countries have also been flourishing in the recent years and could be curbed by the current rise of tensions as the border remains closed. For instance, the \$1.2 billion CASA 1000 project, aimed at developing energy connectivity between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, is not fully completed.⁵³ Its development is closely monitored by international donors, who will end up considering that the disagreements and divergent viewpoints of those four actors are causing troubles on its success. Moreover, the fact that the Sher Khan Bandar BCP remains open to traffic, and that electricity provision to Afghanistan has not been cut off by Tajikistan are signs that both Tajikistan and Afghanistan are relying on bilateral trade.⁵⁴

Afghan refugees

Finally, the situation of Afghan refugees is a key issue for the government of Tajikistan. Many consider leaving the country, and the border was already crossed by over a thousand Afghan civil servants the day before the Taliban took control of the northern districts of Eastern Badakhshan,⁵⁵ though they were sent back to Afghanistan shortly after. More recently, a group of 100 Afghans was accepted and transferred to a Dushanbe suburb, while another 100 were sent back.⁵⁶ The President of Tajikistan has publicly displayed his support of Afghans and to the NRF opposed to the Taliban. Celebrating the 30th anniversary of independence on September 9, 2021, President Rahmon told Fahim Fana, an Afghan singer, that Tajikistan would not abandon Afghans, before declaring that his performance and invitation at a concert to celebrate the independence of Tajikistan was a sign of respect to the people of Afghanistan.⁵⁷ Even before the border was fully seized by the Taliban, Tajikistani authorities had publicly pledged to host Afghan refugees, up to 100,000,⁵⁸ even if they do not currently have the infrastructure or funds to act on those declarations. Public opinion seems to share this helping hand rhetoric, as many Tajikistanis

⁵³ See CASA 1000 official website: <http://www.casa-1000.org/>.

⁵⁴ Asia-Plus. "Taliban movement reportedly waives visa requirements for Tajik drivers at Sher Khan Bandar crossing", *Asia Plus TJ*. July 13, 2021. <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/security/20210713/taliban-movement-reportedly-waives-visa-requirements-for-tajik-drivers-at-sher-khan-bandar-crossing> (last accessed on October 4, 2021); Iskandar Firuz and Shahlo Abdullo. "Taliban povliâl na geografiû maršrutov tadžikskih fur. VIDEO" [The Taliban have influenced the geography of Tajik trucks' routes. VIDEO], *Radio Ozodi*. September 19, 2021. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31467798.html> (last accessed on October 4, 2021).

⁵⁵ Author's fieldwork, July 2021.

⁵⁶ RFE/RL's Tajik service. "Tajikistan Accepts Around 100 Afghans Fleeing The Taliban, But Sends 100 Back." *Gandhara*. September 13, 2021. <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-refugees-tajikistan-taliban/31457701.html> (last accessed on October 4, 2021).

⁵⁷ See video on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HiUKhpKuWY&t=243s>.

⁵⁸ Asia-Plus. "Tajikistan ready to accept about 100,000 Afghans seeking refuge, says Tajik emergencies official." *Asia Plus TJ*. July 23, 2021. <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/society/20210723/tajikistan-ready-to-accept-about-100000-afghans-seeking-refuge-says-tajik-emergencies-official> (last accessed on October 3, 2021); Asia-Plus. "If necessary, we can accept 10,000 Afghan refugees, says GBAO governor." *Asia Plus TJ*. June 23, 2021. <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/security/20210623/if-necessary-we-can-accept-10000-afghan-refugees-says-gbao-governor> (last accessed on October 3, 2021).

remember the help of Afghanistan during the civil war, claiming it would only be fair to help Afghans now.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, several families have been congregating along the border on the Afghan side, requesting the help of Tajikistan. The intensity of despair of those people can be assessed by one fact: it is the first time since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 that the border is considered by thousands of Afghans as a resource to escape from Afghanistan.⁶⁰ Following the end of Tajikistan's civil war, illegal crossings have not been a massive phenomenon, even though some portions of the border are easy to cross due to low water levels.

But there are several reasons as to why Afghans have not crossed en masse. First, many do not have people to rely on in Tajikistan, the financial means, or the proper documents to leave, as many Afghan rural communities remain in a state of extreme poverty. In the district of Vanj bordering Afghanistan, a woman once gave me this answer: “our living conditions are the same, why would they come settle here, what do we have to offer?” Second, the border districts in Afghanistan until very recently were protected from war violence. In this way, fleeing did not make sense for communities strongly attached to their homeland. Third, the border remains militarized and not open by the Tajikistani side, despite President Rahmon's compassion. A recent video broadcast by a local media outlet, *Badakhshan Plus*, shows a reporter meeting with Afghans in the Eshkashem area willing to cross but unable to achieve their goal. The reporter then interviews Taliban border guards who claim they have no issue in opening the border and letting the refugees cross if they have the legal documents to do so. However, Tajikistani soldiers on the other side do not make themselves visible and keep the border strictly sealed, as described by the reporter.⁶¹

Two weeks later, according to a report by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, those Afghans massing near Eshkashem were forced by the Taliban to move away from the border with Tajikistan “amid reports of death threats from the militants.”⁶² According to the same report, approximately 2,000 people were trying to traverse from that part of the border, hoping that Tajikistan would act on President Rahmon's declarations to Afghans at risk and that the Taliban would not harm them. Neither the Tajikistani authorities nor the Taliban have actually delivered on their statements.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan in Badakhshan has followed a trajectory that enabled the former to benefit from neighboring the latter. With a change of regime in Afghanistan, however, Tajikistani authorities have not reopened their side of the border, already shut down as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if President Rahmon is capitalizing on the turmoil to fuel a well-known ethnonationalist narrative, which has gained traction in Tajikistan by pointing out the attacks on ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan, the posture is risky

⁵⁹ Author's fieldwork, Summer 2021.

⁶⁰ Shirin Akiner. *Tajikistan: disintegration or reconciliation?* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001), p. 83.

⁶¹ See video on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvCj1MaGbyI>.

⁶² RFE/RL's Tajik Service. “Taliban Uses Force, Fear To Push Hundreds Of Afghans From Tajik Border.” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*. October 8, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-uses-force-and-fear-to-push-hundreds-of-afghans-from-tajik-border/31499857.html> (last accessed on October 13, 2021).

and even more so for those living and depending on the border. The rapid escalation of tensions between Tajikistan and the Taliban and the gap between words and reality will contribute to postponing the opening of the border and impacting the borderland dwellers.