

TAJIKISTAN STEPS OUT AND STANDS UP

Stephen Blank

Much has been written about the decline of Russian influence in Central Asia and the rising self-assertion of local governments. Most of this commentary focuses on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the two richest and strongest states in Central Asia. However, the decline of Russia's capacity for dominating Central Asia and local governments' greater freedom of action has become equally visible to states like Tajikistan that are often overlooked. Dushanbe cannot and has not gone as far as Astana and Tashkent and frequently acts out of necessity as much as choice. Nevertheless, the signs of its growing capacity and of Russia's parallel decline are mounting.

BACKGROUND: Even though Tajikistan imported 91 percent of its petroleum products from Russia in the first half of 2026, it began importing Iranian oil in August because it cannot rely exclusively on continuing Russian supplies. Ukraine's attacks on Russian refineries have forced Moscow to impose export restrictions that have rebounded on Central Asian countries like Tajikistan. Thus, while most of its energy imports originate in Russia, Tajikistan has had to risk falling afoul of U.S. sanctions on Iran to sustain its economy and other Central Asian states have also had to follow suit for the same reason.

This is far from the only example of Russia's decline. Hitherto, Russia has been virtually the sole source of Central Asian militaries' armaments. Now, due to the pressures imposed by the demands emanating from the war in Ukraine, foreign sanctions on components, and the lackluster performance of Russian weapons, that is no longer the case for all the Central Asian states. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have acquired India's Akash air-defense system. Tajikistan has also purchased China's HQ-17AE air defense systems, whereas Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan also operate Chinese systems. These purchases of diverse and heterogeneous systems from multiple suppliers generate challenges of management and integration into a functioning whole. Nonetheless, they send an unmistakable message that Russia can no longer play an exclusive role as the sole regional security manager. In many cases, Russia will not be able to maintain supply chains or provide repairs to aging equipment, thus its ability to provide for Tajikistan's security is obviously declining.

This does not imply that Tajikistan can or will go as far as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have gone in diversifying their foreign policy options to enhance their actual sovereignty and independence. For example, Tajikistan, in an apparent effort to placate Russia, has begun the procedure for withdrawing from the International Criminal Court (ICC), which has indicted President Vladimir Putin for war crimes in the war against Ukraine. Indeed, when Putin visited Dushanbe in 2025, Tajikistan refused to arrest him. This led the ICC to find Tajikistan in breach of its obligations, leaving it no choice but to initiate the withdrawal. In a contest between the ICC and Russia, Tajikistan obviously chose Russia.

IMPLICATIONS: Nevertheless, Tajikistan has shown and will continue to show that it is responsive to international developments beyond Russia. Tajikistan's Humo Bank warned its Russian clients that unless they visited one of its offices in Tajikistan and submitted to a biometric identification by September 30, their cards would be blocked

starting on October 1. Although Humo Bank cited the need to protect its clients from fraud; apparently the real reason was Western pressure operating through Visa Direct to threaten sanctions unless Humo Bank stopped allowing certain clients to use it to circumvent sanctions.

Although Humo Bank operates in Tajikistan under license from the government; it is owned by the Japanese Investment holding firm, Gojo & Co, and is therefore vulnerable to Western pressure. However, what is interesting in this case is that Tajikistan acceded to that pressure targeting its Russian customers.

Moreover, in this context Humo Bank was not the only bank that yielded to Western pressure. For example, Revolut Bank stopped accepting top-ups from credit cards issued in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan for EU residents, claiming that payment systems had classified those countries as high-risk. Tajikistan took advantage of foreign pressure to limit Russian influence in its banking system. And it did so despite the fact that its economy depends to a great degree on remittances from Tajik migrant workers in Russia and the ensuing unimpeded flow of capital through Russian banks. None of this suggests that Tajikistan can or will emulate the actions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in making extensive deals with Washington, Brussels, the Gulf states, and others. Tajikistan does not have these capabilities, nor will it attain them anytime soon. Its ability to play China off against Russia, and to balance other external actors against Moscow and Beijing, is much lower than that of Astana and Tashkent.

Yet the decline of Russia's capability in the economic as well as the military sector is both creating more space for independent action on Tajikistan's part and the necessity for it to defend its own interests. Moreover, Russia's decline has led other foreign actors, including Western banking and financial interests as well as Chinese and Indian defense exporters, to fill the ensuing vacuum created by Russia's increasing incapacity. In cases where the costs to Tajikistan from striking at Russian interests outweigh the benefits it might gain, as in the example of the ICC, Dushanbe has refused to antagonize Moscow. This pattern is likely to continue for some time to come, especially since the situation in and around Afghanistan, which is a vital security interest of Tajikistan that it cannot manage by itself, becomes more precarious. However, as Tajikistan continues to work more cooperatively with other Central Asian and foreign governments, its ability to stand up for itself will grow.

CONCLUSIONS: Increasingly the trends towards regional self-assertion and involvement with partners beyond Russia and China are becoming more prominent in Central Asia's politics. The fact that this is occurring not only with regard to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, but also in Tajikistan's case suggests that these trends are putting down lasting roots. Therefore, despite the imbalance of capabilities between Moscow and Dushanbe, we should expect to see more examples Central Asian including Tajik self-assertion. Yet we should also, based on the mounting constraints upon Russia, see more examples of its growing incapacity to enforce unilateral dominance over local governments.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Stephen Blank is a Senior Fellow with the Foreign Policy Research Institute, www.fpri.org.