

## Chinese-Tajikistani Security Cooperation Gaining Momentum

By Matthew Stein<sup>a</sup> with Peter Wood<sup>b</sup>

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- China and Tajikistan share a 477km border and have an estimated \$1.78 billion in bilateral trade, which is significantly imbalanced in favor of China.
- Recent years have seen a significant improvement in relations between China and Tajikistan, with China constructing a military base in 2016 near Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan and a November 2022 bilateral agreement to increase security cooperation.
- China's security cooperation with Tajikistan does not appear to conflict or cause friction with Tajikistan's main security cooperation partner, Russia, but nevertheless advances Chinese interests in the region at a time when Russian support is limited due to its invasion of Ukraine.

### INTRODUCTION

China and Tajikistan established diplomatic relations in 1992 when Tajikistan<sup>1</sup> became independent following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and have signed several important bilateral agreements in the years since, including comprehensive strategic partnership agreements in 2017 and in 2019.<sup>2,3,4</sup> The Chinese government has been eager to “dock” Tajikistan's National Development Strategy-2030 (NDS-2030) with

the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Tajikistani government presented its plan to Chinese officials on the sidelines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in May 2017.<sup>5</sup> China has become one of Tajikistan's biggest investors and, according to Chinese scholars, some 50 joint projects have been carried out and 300 Chinese companies operate in Tajikistan.<sup>6,7,8</sup> China held a summit with leaders from Central Asia in May 2023, committing to further expanding infrastructure projects in the region. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and

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Kyrgyzstan have signed on to Chinese President Xi's landmark Global Community of Shared Future concept and committed to support China's policies regarding the status of Taiwan.<sup>9,10</sup> Underpinning this relationship, however, is a broad engagement in security cooperation.<sup>11</sup>

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## MAIN AREAS OF CHINESE SECURITY COOPERATION WITH TAJIKISTAN

China and Tajikistan's security cooperation can be traced back to the origins of the SCO, which formed in 1996 as the "Shanghai Five" with China and Tajikistan as original members. The organization later renamed itself the SCO in 2001.<sup>12</sup> Chinese-Tajikistani security cooperation has been influenced by additional factors. The United States increased security cooperation with Tajikistan while carrying out operations in Afghanistan after 2001, causing Russia to increase its support for Tajikistan to maintain a presence in the country and in the broader Central Asia region. Russia's 201st Military Base in Tajikistan has been the largest contingent of the Russian armed forces permanently deployed outside the country.<sup>13</sup> China increased its involvement with Tajikistan in the years since then, including through several joint military exercises, training for Tajikistani officers in China, support for Tajikistan's armed forces, and construction of infrastructure on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border.<sup>14</sup> The infrastructure includes a reported 30-40 border posts.<sup>15</sup> China also built support facilities for officers in the capital Dushanbe.

Joint military exercises have taken place either on a bilateral basis or through the auspices of the SCO and have often involved counterterrorism scenarios.<sup>16</sup> China's construction of facilities for Tajikistan includes barracks and other facilities along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border for Tajikistan's Border Guards Service as well as a facility in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast for Tajikistan's Interior Ministry.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to joint military exercises, security cooperation between China and Tajikistan within the SCO involves efforts to combat what members of the organization see as the three biggest threats to security: terrorism, separatism, and extremism, referred to by China as the "three evils." One of the SCO's permanent bodies is the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure, headquartered in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. It facilitates joint efforts of member states to deal with the three threats in the physical and information domain, including cyberspace.<sup>18</sup> While Chinese-Tajikistani cooperation in the SCO has a somewhat different focus than their bilateral security cooperation, it offers an additional mechanism to pursue mutual security interests.

China has also established a "climate and environment observation station" in Shahritus, Tajikistan.<sup>19</sup> While it has been described as explicitly for scientific purposes, other similar facilities, such as China's global ground segment (support stations for objects in orbit) and cooperation with international observatories have clear dual-use applications.<sup>20</sup>

One possible friction point involves border disputes. In 2011, the two countries resolved their longstanding border dispute dating to pre-Soviet times, with the Tajikistani government transferring more than 1000 square kilometers along the border in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast to China after years of negotiations.<sup>21,22</sup> While the transfer took place outside of typical security cooperation activities, it demonstrated China's level of engagement with Tajikistan in the years after 2001. However, this agreement does not appear to have fully put an end to issues over the border.<sup>23</sup> Chinese scholars have suggested that the Pamirs—a mountainous region that includes much of Eastern Tajikistan—should be returned to China. China historically called this area Congling [葱岭], an area that was first ceded to Russia and later part of the line dividing spheres of influence with Great Britain in the 1870s. While not communicated by the Chinese government,

these claims appear to have been repeated by state-controlled media, lending weight to the suggestion.<sup>24</sup>

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## CHINESE-TAJIKISTANI SECURITY COOPERATION'S IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIAN SECURITY INTERESTS

Russia's declining economic influence likely created an opening for China in Tajikistan and the other Central Asian states.<sup>25</sup> China's security cooperation with the government of Tajikistan has largely not challenged or conflicted with the security interests of Russia, which has been the most consistent and significant security cooperation partner for Tajikistan. Chinese-Tajikistani security cooperation takes place while Russia continues to have a presence in Tajikistan with the 201st Military Base, ongoing Russian-Tajikistani security cooperation, and cooperation through the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a multilateral military-security body composed of several former-Soviet republics.<sup>26</sup> While Tajikistan regularly participates with China in SCO activities, its ties to Russia and the CSTO go back further and hold greater significance. Russia provided a peacekeeping force to Tajikistan during the Tajikistani Civil War via the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a forerunner of the CSTO.<sup>27</sup> The CSTO maintains a collective rapid reaction force, with Tajikistan designating a battalion as part of this force. Part of the battalion deployed on the CSTO's peacekeeping mission in Almaty, Kazakhstan in January 2022.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, the Russian government maintains positive relations with China, and the two countries share common security interests in the region. China's base in Gorno-Badakhshan is not near any of the Russian military facilities in Tajikistan. It reportedly consists of a force of several dozen personnel, but they are not from the People's Liberation Army and lack the combat strength and capabilities of the Russian forces in Tajikistan.

Russia's 201st Military Base has an estimated 5,000 soldiers organized into three motorized rifle regiments with various artillery, air defense, and fixed-wing and rotary aircraft providing support.<sup>29</sup> The units of the 201st have been in place since Tajikistan became independent and they played an important role during the Tajikistani Civil War from 1992-1997.<sup>30</sup> While Russia has not publicly stated any objections to Chinese-Tajikistani security cooperation and China's base in Tajikistan, it has taken steps to increase its own military presence in the country. Russia delivered additional weapons and equipment in the years since China opened its base in Gorno-Badakhshan, including modernized infantry fighting vehicles and a unit of S-300 surface-to-air missile systems.<sup>31</sup> The 201st Military Base has been in place as a defense against instability in neighboring Afghanistan, but the S-300s are outside of the scope of what Russian forces would need against the Taliban or militant groups in Afghanistan. Russia likely tolerates Chinese activity in Tajikistan but appears prepared to maintain its presence there.

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## TAJIKISTANI SECURITY COOPERATION BEYOND CHINA AND RUSSIA

The Tajikistani government appears eager to expand security cooperation beyond China and Russia due to growing fears about Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. This has prompted Tajikistan's President and Defense Minister to meet with Iranian and Pakistani leaders to address what they regard as a mutual threat.<sup>32</sup> However, other international players have also established security relations with Tajikistan.

India has been engaged in security cooperation with Tajikistan since its independence to varying degrees. In the 1990s, the Indian government helped establish a small hospital at the Farkhor airfield near the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border for members of the Northern Alliance during the Afghan civil war. After the leader of Afghanistan's

Northern Alliance Ahmad Shah Massoud—an ethnic Tajik—was wounded in an attack carried out by al-Qaeda in September 2001, he was flown to Farkhor for treatment but died enroute.<sup>33</sup> In 2002, India paid an estimated \$70 million to refurbish the Ayni airfield outside Tajikistan’s capital Dushanbe. The refurbishment included an air-traffic control tower, hangars, and extended the runway to accommodate any type of aircraft. The agreement reportedly would have allowed India to base fixed-wing and rotary aircraft at Ayni, but the basing portion of the agreement eventually fell through.<sup>34</sup> Sporadic joint exercises have included an event in 2003, as well as a few exercises through the SCO after India joined the organization in 2017.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, while experiencing periods of intense engagement, India’s security cooperation with Tajikistan has been inconsistent compared to Tajikistan’s other partners.

By contrast, Tajikistan’s security cooperation with the United States has been fairly consistent since 2001 and has included joint military exercises, funding and training for members of Tajikistan’s armed forces, and donations of vehicles and other equipment.<sup>36</sup> Funding and equipment have not strictly been for the armed forces, but also for Tajikistan’s Border Guards Service.<sup>37</sup> While the United States increased security assistance to Tajikistan only after the onset of Coalition operations in Afghanistan, U.S. security cooperation has continued since the Coalition’s withdrawal in August 2021.

Turkey is also increasingly a player in Central Asia, in general, and in Tajikistan, in particular. Relations have progressively improved, especially since a 2012 state visit by Tajikistani President Imamali Rahman in 2012.<sup>38</sup> Subsequent visits by Turkish President Erdoğan in 2019, and the ministers of finance and foreign affairs in late 2023 and early 2024 indicate a commitment to deepening this relationship. On the security front, Turkish defense firm Baykar, which has sold its well-regarded Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) to other Central Asian states,<sup>39</sup> has

reportedly also sold them to Tajikistan.<sup>40</sup>

Lastly, Iran and Tajikistan have cooperated in several political and economic areas since Tajikistan became independent. Iran had been involved in the efforts in the 1990s to end the Tajikistani Civil War.<sup>41</sup> While the two countries share linguistic, cultural, and historical roots, which have continued to develop, their relationship has not surpassed the strength of Russian-Tajikistani ties.<sup>42</sup> However, in 2021 the two agreed to increase security cooperation, including the creation of a joint defense committee that would allow Iranian weapon systems to be exported to Tajikistan.<sup>43</sup> This was followed by the May 2022 announcement of the opening of a facility to produce the Iranian Ababil-2 unmanned aerial system in Tajikistan. Russia’s preoccupation with its invasion of Ukraine creates an opening for Iran to expand its influence in Tajikistan at Russia’s expense, but more time is needed to assess how much security cooperation between Iran and Tajikistan can grow.

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## IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

There have been conflicting reports about how many casualties Russia has sustained in Ukraine, but the invasion has clearly had an impact on the overall readiness of the Russian armed forces, specifically in regard to its ability to field trained and adequately equipped units.<sup>44</sup> This includes Russian units in Tajikistan. Russia reportedly deployed around 1,000 soldiers from a unit of the 201st Military Base to fight in Ukraine and they sustained an unknown number of casualties.<sup>45</sup> While it is unknown to what extent these losses have been replaced, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced in April 2023 that Russia will increase the readiness of the 201st Military Base.<sup>46</sup> Shoigu stated that Russia is doing this in response to the United States trying to restore a military presence in Central Asia, but there have been no reports of the United States being involved in negotiations with a regional government for access, basing, or overflight. The United States

has not maintained a military presence in the region since it left the Transit Center at Manas, Kyrgyzstan in June 2014.<sup>47</sup> Shoigu's announcement more likely is an indicator of Russia replacing losses the 201st sustained in Ukraine.

While the war in Ukraine has had an impact on Russia's ability to maintain the readiness of its armed forces, Russia's 201st Military Base and ongoing security cooperation with Tajikistan demonstrate that it will maintain its partnership with Tajikistan and presence in the country over the next few years. However, if the war in Ukraine continues indefinitely and Russia is no longer able to allocate enough effort and resources to Tajikistan, it could open opportunities for another partner. China may have already positioned itself to fulfill this role.

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## THE FUTURE OF CHINESE-TAJIKISTANI SECURITY COOPERATION

In November 2022, China and Tajikistan reached an agreement to increase bilateral security cooperation and to develop a more comprehensive strategic partnership. The agreement calls for joint military exercises to take place every other year with a focus on counterterrorism and included the creation of a department to design and facilitate joint exercises. China and Tajikistan carried out several bilateral joint military exercises prior to the agreement, but these only took place intermittently. The agreement also outlined increased coordination and training between Chinese and Tajikistani special forces units involved in counterterrorism.<sup>48</sup> The Tajikistani and Chinese governments did not release further details about the agreement.

While Tajikistan has dealt with some notable counterterrorism situations over the years, one of the biggest threats to its security has been border clashes with Kyrgyzstan. Several clashes have taken place in recent years near disputed sections

of the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border, the largest of which occurred in September 2022. Russia and the CSTO have tried to resolve the situation but have yet to achieve any resolution. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have made a little progress through bilateral negotiations to demarcate their border, but the possibility of conflict remains.<sup>49</sup> While clashes involved the border guards of both sides and not military units, it is possible that Tajikistan would use a counterterrorism unit in a future clash with Kyrgyzstan. Both sides have deployed additional units to the border in response to the clashes.<sup>50</sup>

In terms of arms sales, China appears to have sold its Wing Loong UAVs to Kazakhstan, though a review of available information does not suggest Tajikistan has been a customer.<sup>51</sup> As China and Tajikistan's relationship deepens, it is likely that Tajikistan will increasingly look to China for arms, possibly to include the Wing Loong or other weapons systems.

Overall, the November 2022 agreement did not mark a major increase in Chinese-Tajikistani security cooperation, but served as an example of how they are steadily increasing relations. Given the history of their security cooperation, this is likely how the relationship will progress through 2030 as Tajikistan carries out its development plan.

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## ENDNOTES

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