

Russia stronger in Tajikistan

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Two agreements were concluded during the visit the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, made to Tajikistan on 4–5 October: one extending the term for the stationing of the Russian 201st military base in Tajikistan until 2042 and the other determining the rules of Russian aid in combating drugs. Four memoranda were also signed: on military co-operation, energy co-operation, migration co-operation and on supplies of petroleum products to Tajikistan. However, the parties failed to reach a compromise regarding the return of Russian border troops to the Tajik-Afghan border or on Russia's support for the construction of the Rogun hydroelectric power plant, a key project for Tajikistan.

Commentary

- The agreements setting the rules for the stationing of the 201st Russian military base must be seen as success for the Russian negotiators (the agreement in force so far, which was concluded in 1993, was set to expire at the end of next year). Moscow has thus guaranteed itself a long-term military presence in Tajikistan on very favourable terms. The document, according to Russian reports, does not provide for any rent, and the soldiers serving in this base will have partial immunity (similar to the status of embassy technical staff). In return, Russia undertook in one of the memoranda to participate in the modernisation of the Tajik army and to train local officers. It is worth adding that since 2004 Russia has owned a space surveillance complex in Nurak, in south-western Tajikistan.
- The agreement on assistance in combating drugs, under which aid at approximately US\$5 million is to be offered to Tajikistan, and the remaining memoranda are beneficial primarily to Tajikistan. Russia is to introduce facilitations for example for Tajik expatriate workers by granting them three-year work permits (the estimated number of expatriate workers is over one million; in 2011, they sent approximately US\$3 billion in remittances to Tajikistan, an equivalent of almost half of the country's GDP). Furthermore, export duties imposed on petroleum products sold from Russia to Tajikistan are to be partially lifted. This is expected to result in a reduction of the high fuel prices. In turn, the memorandum on energy co-operation, which envisages that Russia will participate in the construction of several small and medium hydroelectric power plants on Tajikistan's internal waters, is imprecise and contains no binding undertakings.

- The issues on which no compromise has been achieved, and which are essential for both parties, are: Russia's resumption of the protection of Tajikistan's borders (which is important for Moscow also in the context of the planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014), and Russian support for the construction of the Rogun water power plant, which Dushanbe is seeking (Uzbekistan is opposed to this). These issues were not addressed in the official statements. They are likely to be the subject of further negotiations.
- Vladimir Putin's visit and the documents adopted fit in with the Russian diplomatic offensive across Central Asia, which has been observed over the past few months (for example, a package of Kyrgyz-Russian agreements was signed in Bishkek on 20 September). This offensive is aimed on the one hand at applying pressure on Uzbekistan – which had been distancing itself from Moscow and had shown ambitions of becoming the regional leader – and on the other hand at Moscow gradually regaining the influence it has lost to China and to some extent to the USA (the latter of which is also activating its policy in this region).