

Tajikistan on the verge of civil war; ISAF and the USA on the verge of new problems

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The army's spectacular defeat in the fight with rebels in the Rasht Valley has laid bare the frailty of Tajikistan and the policy of its president; at the same time it has opened the country up to massive internal shocks. This poses a risk for America's and NATO's strategy for stabilising the situation in Afghanistan

On 19 September in Tajikistan the most serious clash since the civil war (1992-1997) took place between the government forces and divisions of former field commanders linked with Islamic radicals and clans marginalised by the government in recent years. The government forces saw dozens of casualties. The clash highlights the scale of Tajikistan's internal pressures and suggests a further escalation of conflicts. The increased instability in Tajikistan (and in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan) is a serious threat to the interests of the USA and NATO in connection with carrying out their operation in Afghanistan. Furthermore, it brings closer the perspective of a destabilisation in Central Asia and another round in Russia's battle to regain domination in the region under the flag of stabilisation.

Tajikistan on the verge of civil war?

According to official figures from Tajikistan, on 19 September in Komarob Gorge in the Rasht Valley (previously known as Karotegin and Gharm) there was an attack on a Tajik military column, as a result of which 23 soldiers died and 25 were classified as being injured. Responsibility for the attack has been placed on former field commanders from the time of the civil war: Alovuddin Davlatov (known as Ali Bedak) or Abdullo Rakhimov (known as Mullo Abdullo) supported by international terrorists (according to one version, there is support also from fugitives from the Dushanbe heightened security prison who escaped on 23 August this year). Their forces are estimated at 100 men. It was the largest armed clash in the region since the civil war in Tajikistan (ended 1997) and the Batken crises (attacks from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan from Tajik territory on Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999, 2000).

The attack on the convoy in Komarob appears to confirm the suspicion that government forces have been attempting for at least a year to pacify the Rasht Valley. The region was a base for the opposition during the civil war and, when it finished, was *inter alia* a transit route for narcotics and a safe haven for post-war marauders which was not strongly controlled by Rahmon. In recent years the government has consistently – in violation of peace terms signed in 1997 – aimed towards the marginalisation of that elite (partially this has been

done through arrests, e.g. a few days before the attack a prominent activist of the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, the brother of Ali Bedak, was arrested). Large scale pacification operations using the military and internal forces have been conducted since May 2009 (during which one person who died was the former chief of staff for the opposition, later a minister in the government of Emomalii Rahmon, Mirzo Ziyoyev); these were intensified following the escape of prisoners in August this year who had been accused of terrorist and oppositionist activity. According to unofficial information, approx. 2,000 soldiers are said to be taking part in activities in the Rasht Valley – the presence of at least dozens of soldiers in the rather isolated Komarob would appear to confirm this. The specifics of the region, the scale of the pacification operation and the strength of resistance all lead to the conclusion that the situation will most likely continue to flare up. It is difficult to state clearly who exactly the Tajik army is fighting. It seems that they are mainly local leaders and former fighters who have been threatened with arrest (e.g. Ali Bedak); they could also be veterans of the last war in Afghanistan with links to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda who have been returning to the Rasht Valley since 2008: the IMU and the division of Mullo Abdullo (a former field commander who does not recognise the peace terms of 1997, temporarily cooperating with Russian forces in Tajikistan, in 2000-2008 he fought in Afghanistan on the side of the Taliban).

The possible escalation of the conflict in the Rasht Valley is a highly serious threat for the government of President Rahmon and for the stability of his regime (and of the country), more so due to the fact that it has added itself to a long list of problems. The Tajik state – its institutions, efficiency, authority – is weak and unfit to solve the grave social-economic crisis. At the same time, a consolidation of Rahmon's authoritarianism narrows his immediate political base which in turn causes frustration and tension among the elite. On the other hand, it is conducive to the development of the radical Islamic opposition. Dushanbe's international position is weak: alongside its problems of the instability in neighbouring Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan, it has very bad relations with Uzbekistan and very difficult relations with Russia. In this context, the regular battles (war) in the Rasht Valley could spread or become a catalyst for political shockwaves (in Dushanbe) and social shockwaves in the remainder of the country.

Tajikistan's problems are the problems of the USA and NATO

Both Tajikistan and its neighbour, a Kyrgyzstan undermined by its tough political-social crisis, are places crucial to the strategy of the USA and NATO for Afghanistan. They are temporarily being used as logistics bases (the American base in Kyrgyzstan's Manas) and a transit route used for the requirements of NATO forces in Afghanistan. In the long-term perspective (the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan) both countries are set to act as buffers to Afghanistan and – as it seems – bases for temporary operations in Afghanistan. The implementation of that plan in its minimal version will be dependent on the internal stability of both countries and the development of military-training cooperation between them and the USA and NATO. In recent months and weeks there has been an intensification of discussions and negotiation on the subject of the creation of American training centres in Tajikistan (Karatag) and Kyrgyzstan (Osh) and of a NATO anti-terrorist centre in Tajikistan and even the use of Tajik air bases in Ayni by US forces. In recent weeks

this has been the goal of visits in the region by Robert Blake (American assistant secretary of state) and Robert Simmons (special envoy of the secretary general of NATO); the negotiations are currently underway in the US in connection with the presence of the presidents of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as part of the United Nations General Assembly.

The perspective of an increased military presence for the USA and NATO in the region, in particular on the basis of direct understandings made with the regional leaders is treated in Russia as a serious and unacceptable threat to its interests. Controversies are being discussed between Moscow and Washington, with the parties (especially the USA) declaring a willingness for good-natured cooperation in the region. However, the situation is stimulating a peculiar 'race to the bases'. Russia is currently negotiating the opening of a base in Osh: the Russian media is speculating about marching to Osh in the coming weeks a reinforced battalion which is currently taking part in manoeuvres of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Kazakhstan. It also seems clear that the conditions for using a base in Tajikistan's Ayni are being negotiated.

The issue which in fact represents the greatest threat to America's and NATO's plans for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – and which is, furthermore, a chance for Russia to strengthen its own position in the region – is the profound instability of the countries. There is chaos in Kyrgyzstan caused by the coup in April this year, the upcoming parliamentary elections and a host of internal pressures threatening ethnic and regional conflicts. The situation in Tajikistan is becoming unstable due to the country's internal problems, the weak position of Rahmon and the spectre of civil war. The reliability for the US and Brussels of the governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is falling and, what is more, there are questions over the permeability of the routes running between the two countries and Afghanistan and over their potential function as a buffer following the completion of operations in Afghanistan itself. However, Washington has neither the means nor the political will for an independent stabilisation of the situation.

In the case of both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the crises are strengthening the position of Russia as a country possessing the means and the experience in tactical games of internal instability in the CIS area which may be used as a political instrument (e.g. during the civil war in Tajikistan, also currently in the North Caucasus). It is almost certain that Russia will take advantage of the current problems in Tajikistan to significantly diminish the position of President Rahmon and to weaken his direct cooperation with the West. Moreover, from Russia's perspective, a destabilisation in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan will force those countries and the West into granting Russia the mandate to freely create the situation in the region. A tangible consequence of the development of this situation would be, for example, a limitation of the military presence of the USA/NATO in the region and the close connection of their presence with Russia. New Russian military bases in Central Asia could also be expected. A side effect would be a sustained and in practice (against the hopes of Russia) difficult to control instability in the region.

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