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China-Tajikistan military cooperation: changing traditional security paradigm in Central Asia?

In October, Tajikistan and China were engaged in a five-day counterterrorism exercise in Tajikistan's Ishkoshim region, which borders with Afghanistan, drawing Russia's attention to the growing interest of Beijing to enhance the military cooperation with Central Asian republics both bilaterally and multilaterally.

As a matter of fact, during 2016 China has promoted the development of a joint military and security cooperation with Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, officially aimed to strengthen regional security, which has been perceived by Russia as an attempt to create a new regional security bloc excluding Moscow, the traditional security provider in the region.

Since its independence, Tajikistan has been a close military ally of Russia, as member of the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) and also hosting Russian military facilities where are deployed nearly 7.000 soldiers, the largest Russian military presence abroad. However, the dangerous threats coming from the porous Tajik-Afghan border have raised concerns about domestic stability.

At present Russia failed to convince Tajik President Emomali Rahmon to redeploy Russian border guards along this troubled frontier, while the financial crisis is hampering Russia in modernizing the Tajik army. China, in contrast, spent \$15 million as bilateral military assistance, promising also to realize new military bases for Tajik border guards, even if Russia's military role remains relevant because Tajikistan will host the Russian military base until 2042.

In the Chinese perspective, the military cooperation with Dushanbe is aimed at preserving security and stability along the Sino-Tajik border, avoiding potential incursions of militants and terrorist coming

from Afghanistan in the Xinjiang region, which is the strategic gateway of the geopolitical and geoeconomic project of the Silk Road Economic Belt, envisaged to cross Central Asia and connecting China with Europe.

Moreover, the future implementation of the fourth branch (Line D) of the China-Central Asia gas pipeline will include Tajikistan as transit country before to reach Chinese markets. Considering that the combination of external and domestic threats characterize Tajikistan as the weaker pawn in the regional security architecture, China will be engaged to reinforce Tajik capacity of military reaction and this bilateral cooperation appears more efficient to achieve Chinese aims, being wary of Russia and CSTO's security umbrella.

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