



CENTRAL ASIA April 2019

Russia's bilateral diplomacy in Central Asia

The visit of Russian President in Kyrgyzstan and the bilateral meeting between Putin and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon in Moscow highlight Russian traditional influence on the foreign policy of these Central Asian countries.

Both countries are geopolitically considered the “weak pawns” in Central Asia, because they have no energy resources to exploit, compared to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and, to a lesser extent, Uzbekistan. However, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are important security partners, both hosting Russian military bases under the aegis of the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization).

The potential adhesion of Tajikistan to the Eurasian Economic Union was one of the main dossiers that Rahmon and Putin discussed during the bilateral meeting held in Moscow during the 17-18th of April. Tajik authorities continue to postpone an official discussion about EAEU's membership, that on the one hand could expand trade and economic opportunities, also extending an improved legislation to better protect more than one million Tajik workers in Russia, (*Emomali Rahmon's Visit to Moscow: Close Ties and Misplaced Hopes*, Cabar, April 19, 2019, <https://reporting.cabar.asia/en/emomali-rahmon-s-visit-to-moscow-close-ties-and-misplaced-hopes/>). Their remittances are crucial because they which represent 40% of the national GDP.

On the other hand, Tajikistan fears that this membership could further boost Russian influence on the country. It is interesting to observe that Tajikistan's potential membership would have relevant geopolitical implications, considering that the new border between China and Central Asian neighbouring countries would become the Moscow-led EAEU.

In the military sphere, Tajikistan and Russia are strategic partners and Moscow has one of the largest military bases abroad: however, Moscow needs to consolidate its presence in this country, following the possible opening of a Chinese military base in south-eastern Tajikistan that could challenge Russia's military supremacy in the region.

During the visit of the Russian president, Russia and Kyrgyzstan signed bilateral agreements and contracts worth \$5,6 billion in order to develop explorations in the mineral and energy sectors and to boost industry and agriculture. Furthermore, Moscow has granted \$30 million to Bishkek, essentially to cover budgetary expenses, to pay for military salaries and social benefits (*Kyrgyzstan: Putin visit brings lavish deals and vows of a bright future*, Eurasianet, March 29, 2019 <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-putin-visit-brings-lavish-deals-and-vows-of-a-bright-future>).

One of the main issues to solve remains the removal of food bans (especially deliveries of beef within the Eurasian Economic Union), which currently hamper trade relations among partners and the worsened bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, following the election of the new Kyrgyz president Sooronbay Jeenbekov.

In the military field, Moscow has obtained the expansion of the Kant military base – which is one of the four Russian military facilities in the country – ensuring Bishkek an annual rent of \$4,8 million, while there are no news about the opening of a new military base in the Batken region (Southern Kyrgyzstan, between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) that could contribute to enhance regional security and to contain potential infiltrations from Afghanistan.

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