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Regional implications of China's military base in Tajikistan

The rather probable presence of a Chinese military base in south-eastern Tajikistan is creating some concern in Russia, Central Asia and United States about Beijing's military ambitions in the region, even if Tajikistan authorities and Chinese government do not officially confirm this fact.

According to some news published in the Indian and US press, satellite photographs have confirmed the existence of more than twenty buildings, lookout towers and at least a confirmed helipad by photographic commercial imagery in the Gorno-Badakhshan's Murghob District bordering on Afghanistan, China and Kyrgyzstan in the Pamir Mountains. The base is estimated to be capable to accommodate between a battalion and a brigade minus. Pictures do not reveal a significant presence of heavy weapons (Gerry Shih, *In Central Asia's forbidding highlands, a quiet newcomer: Chinese troops*, "The Washington Post", February 18, 2019).

This strategic location of the Chinese military base reflects Beijing's growing concerns on stability in Central Asia and Afghanistan, with a special focus on the Afghan-Tajik border which could be the main route for cross-border incursions of terrorists and extremists. China worries that Uighurs separatists from Xinjiang region could benefit of safe bases and support from this uncontrolled area, propagating instability along the shared border which will also affect economic roads and trade corridors conceived within the Belt and Road Initiative, considering that some of them would cross Afghanistan.

In order to address these threats, Tajikistan has been included in the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism, a new security bloc promoted by China, while in October 2016 China held its first-ever joint bilateral counterterrorism exercises in Gorno-Badakhshan province (Fabio Indeo, *The Impact of BRI in Central Asia: building new relations in a reshaped geopolitical scenario*, in W. Zhang, I. Alon, C. Lattemann (eds.), "China's One Belt and One Road Initiative: the Changing Rule of Globalization", Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

If China effectively has opened a military base in Tajikistan, one of the main problem to solve will be how to conciliate this move with the current Central Asia's security architecture, which hampers the deployment of Chinese military bases in the region: Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – as CSTO members – cannot host a foreign military base on their territory without the full consent of all other members of the organization, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan's cornerstones in their foreign policy (Tashkent rejects the deployment of foreign military bases on its territory as well as the participation in any military block, while Turkmenistan adheres to a neutrality policy) excludes this possibility. For the moment strategic ambiguity seems the tacitly applied policy.

Following the ongoing negotiations between Taliban and US (as well as between Taliban and Russia) and the future withdrawal of US military forces from Afghanistan, China has to develop new bilateral and multilateral framework of military cooperation in order to provide security in the region. From the Tajik point of view, China could be a reliable security provider to preserve the country from external incursions of transnational terrorists, also balancing the traditional Russian influence on military cooperation and security issues.

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