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This paper analyses Tajikistan's foreign policy towards Russia between 1991 and 2023 by identifying four distinct stages of this process and exploring their structural determinants. Characteristics of each stage reflect a unique combination of Soviet-era path dependencies, domestic developments in Tajikistan and Russia within a specific time period, as well as changes in the broader international context in which relations between the two countries are embedded. Overall, we can see a clear evolution of Tajik policymakers' perceptions of, and expectations from, Russia.

Following its independence, Tajikistan has been trying to diversify its international relations. As a small, poor, peripheral and post-conflict country, Tajikistan is largely dependent on assistance from external partners. Although the Tajik government has dedicated significant attention to building durable relations with the United States (US) and Western European countries, along with China, the oil-rich states in the Persian Gulf, and Japan and South Korea, Russia has always occupied a special place in its foreign policy. Although Tajikistan does not have a separate foreign policy framework dedicated only to Russia, Russia is officially recognised as its strategic partner. In private, Tajik policymakers often refer to Russia as their country's older brother, which is quite telling about Tajikistan's positionality vis-à-vis Russia. This metaphor denotes an intrinsic type of connection which cannot be disentangled, just like with one's family members. This expression points to shared Soviet history, as well as some ideological alignment regarding, for example, policymakers' preference for a centralised, top-down form of governance. At the same time, Tajikistan's position as a younger sibling reveals a clearly hierarchical relation with Russia in the driving seat.

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STAGE 1 IN THE 1990S: ACTIVELY SEEKING RUSSIA'S SUPPORT

From the early days of its independence in 1991, Tajikistan found itself in a subordinated position towards Russia. Arguably, this relation could not have developed differently. Russia emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union as its successor state. Tajikistan, in contrast, embraced independence as a peripheral and resource-poor country and was soon torn by a civil war (1992-1997).

Already dealing with challenges from its own post-socialist transformation in the early 1990s, initially Russia was not interested in interfering in Tajikistan's domestic conflict. The Tajik pro-government forces, however, were actively seeking Russia's attention and eventually managed to mobilise its support. Following the Soviet collapse, Russia was led by a former high-ranking member of the Communist Party, Boris Yeltsin, and the pro-government military fraction in Tajikistan involved former communists from the Khujand and Kulob regions, who fought against the opposition, dominated by Islamist insurgents. A Soviet-era ideological alignment was thus clearly visible in that early arrangement between the two countries.

During the civil war, the Tajik authorities expected both symbolic and material support from Russia. In 1993, the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. Arguably, however, this friendship and cooperation was needed much more by the Tajik than the Russian side. In 1994, Tajikistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) proudly stated that 'ties with Russia, the political centre of the Commonwealth of Independent States, contribute to the development of the republic.'^[1] Indeed, in the context of the civil war, the backing of Russia as the Soviet successor state has significantly boosted Tajik government's legitimacy at home and abroad. Moreover, in practical terms, it allowed the pro-government forces to gain an upper hand in fighting the insurgents. This was largely thanks to the involvement of the Soviet 201st Motor Rifle Division, which was still stationed in Tajikistan when the Soviet Union collapsed. As in the case of several Soviet assets that previously were jointly owned, in 1992, Boris Yeltsin reinstated this division under Russia's direct control. Together with the 201st division, the Tajik forces were thus able to quickly regain control of Dushanbe and launch an offensive against the rebels who were concentrated in the southwestern parts of the country.

In the mid-1990s, Russia supported the Inter-Tajik dialogue between the pro-government forces and the opposition, as well as the armistice sponsored by the United Nations. These processes resulted in the 1997 peace agreement between the government, represented by Emomali Rahmon, and Abdullo Nuri, representing the

opposition. This document, officially ending the civil war, was negotiated and signed in Moscow in the presence of Boris Yeltsin. The agreement envisaged a division of power between the pro-government forces, which were allocated 70% of seats in the parliament, and the opposition, which was given 30% of seats.



*The signing of the 1997 peace agreement between the opposition leader Abdullo Nuri (left) and Emomali Rahmon (right), in the presence of Boris Yeltsin (second right).
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Post-conflict Tajikistan proactively continued to seek Russia's support. This was reflected in multiple high-level visits and strategic cooperation agreements in political, economic and cultural fields that were signed in the late 1990s. In the context where formal politics became entangled with informal power struggles, an increasing cooperation with Russia allowed the new Tajik political elites to strengthen their position at home, centralise decision-making and gradually sideline the opposition. Overall, this shows that in the first stage, bilateral cooperation with Russia was of crucial importance for the Tajik government. However, it clearly did not have the same meaning for Russia, for whom there was not so much at stake.

STAGE 2 IN THE 2000S: PRIORITISING RUSSIA WITHIN AN 'OPEN DOOR' FOREIGN POLICY

In the second decade of Tajikistan's independent statehood, Russia remained its privileged and arguably also preferred foreign policy partner. This was true despite the fact that in the same period, Tajik policymakers dedicated significant attention to expanding the range of the country's international partners. The latter particularly included the US and Western Europe, which were able to provide Tajikistan with development assistance and concessional loans. The post-conflict reconstruction and an urgent need for foreign aid explain why, in 2002, Tajikistan officially adopted a multi-vector foreign policy approach, which was officially presented as an 'open door' policy. But while Western partners were perfect *donors*, it was still Russia, since 2000 under Vladimir Putin's leadership, that remained the country's political and economic *reference point*.

Tajikistan's post-conflict reconstruction coincided with the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Because Tajikistan shares its entire 1357 km-long southern border with Afghanistan, the country all of a sudden gained a strategic importance for the US. It became part of the Northern Distribution Network which allowed the US, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and allied countries to transfer troops, fuel and military equipment to Afghanistan. This newly gained significance was also accompanied by a boom in donor funding, mainly in the security field. All these developments increased Tajikistan's legitimacy internationally, which potentially might have increased its autonomy from Russia. This, however, did not happen. Tajik policymakers have never allowed themselves to play Russia and its Western partners against each other – unlike neighbouring Kyrgyzstan which in 2009 played a tricky game with Russia and the US over the use of Manas Air, trying to negotiate bigger financial assistance from both.

Fierce in its loyalty, throughout the 2000s Tajikistan has been actively trying to deepen its bilateral cooperation with Russia. As the then Tajik Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hamrokhon Zarifi, wrote, each year multiple 'mutually beneficial international meetings' took place between Tajikistan and Russia[2], including several visits of heads of state Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev to Dushanbe and of Emomali Rahmon to Moscow. Simultaneously, Tajikistan engaged in regional integration with other former Soviet countries in Central Asia and beyond. Most of these regional initiatives were led by Russia, which seemed to suit Tajik policymakers. To mention but a few, Tajikistan joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1991, from 2000 till 2014 it was part of the Eurasian Economic Community, between 1996 and 2001 it was part of

the China and Russia-led Shanghai Five, and starting from 2001 of its successor, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). In 2002, Tajikistan joined the Russia-led counterpart of NATO, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

In the second stage of Tajikistan's foreign policymaking towards Russia, a clear topical preference could be observed. As Zarifi openly wrote, 'the main areas of collaboration [between these two countries] are security and territorial integrity,' and more specifically 'issues of regional security.'^[3] Such focus on security needs to be seen in the context of Tajikistan's collaboration with Western countries which largely centred on liberal peacebuilding, democratisation and development of a market economy. From the perspective of Tajik policymakers, these priorities were defined by donors and, to some extent, imposed on Tajikistan, which heavily relied on development aid and, therefore, had to comply with donors' preferences. However, the priorities of Western partners – revolving around the promotion of political pluralism through free and fair elections, a multi-party political system, free media – could not be appreciated in a political system with affinity for a strong central power that aims to preserve the political status quo. Seen in this light, Tajik policymakers appreciated that in contrast with Western partners, their cooperation with Russia was grounded in notions of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. Cooperation in the field of security implied such non-interference.

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In sum, as emerges from this section, in the 2000s Russia did not object to Tajikistan's multi-vector policy. It was clear to both sides that Russia was Tajikistan's priority, and the interests of Tajikistan's other partners did not overlap with those of Russia. At that time, Russia did not demand from Tajikistan additional proofs of loyalty. Importantly, this is because the Russia at that time was not the Russia of today. Russian policymakers were facing the Second Chechen War (1999-2009) and, unlike today, did not have outward looking aspirations.

STAGE 3 IN THE 2010S: REALISING THE CONSEQUENCES OF ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE ON RUSSIA

In the third stage, in the 2010s, Russia continued to be Tajikistan's de facto privileged partner, yet it remains an open question whether it was still a preferred one. On paper, there was not much change. Tajikistan's MFA continued to repeat that bilateral relations with Russia had 'a particular status of strategic partnership', and that Tajikistan and Russia were 'two brotherly countries.'^[4] In total, between 1992 and 2020, Tajikistan signed more than 290 cooperation agreements with Russia in political, economic, military and cultural fields.^[5] Quantitatively, this number cannot be compared to the amount of documents signed with any other international partner of the country. Throughout the 2010s, however, the consequences of excessive dependence on Russia were already visible, and it became clear that Russia's attitude towards Tajikistan was not necessarily benign. As a result, Tajikistan's policymaking towards Russia was less driven by actual admiration, hope and trust, and instead, it became more performative.

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Tajikistan's perception of Russia has clearly also changed because of internal processes occurring in the country. With progressing nation-building centred around a narrowly defined national identity, the political discourse in Tajikistan has increasingly focused on the past, present and future that was framed as exclusively Tajik. Consequently, the narratives about a regional history and shared Soviet past have faded away, whereas new national goals have been defined around the future of the Tajik nation. This trend is clearly visible in the transformation of annual presidential addresses to parliament, which are de facto the most important strategic documents in the country, in that they summarise achievements of the past year and set orientations for the year to come. If in his speeches in the 2000s Emomali Rahmon expressed gratefulness to Russia and discussed at length the two countries' common past, throughout the 2010s the role of Russia changed. If it was mentioned at all, it was listed among other countries that Tajikistan collaborated with. Russia always came first, but nonetheless as part of a bigger group encompassing China, Western and other states.

Simultaneously with Russia's disappearance, the topic of the mass labour migration of Tajik citizens – to an unspecified country which, as everyone understood, was Russia – became more and more present in presidential speeches. Given the dire state of

Tajikistan's economy, after the civil war more than one million Tajik nationals became labour migrants in Russia, a number which exceeds 10% of the country's population. By 2013, Tajikistan was declared by the World Bank one of the top remittance-dependent countries in the world,[6] and over various years remittances sent home by migrants corresponded to between 30% and 50% of the GDP.

Importantly, apart from being a source of income for most Tajik households, labour migration became the main source of the country's vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia. For example, in his annual message in 2015 President Rahmon mentioned an urgent need to 'strengthen cooperation with the relevant authorities of labour-receiving countries with regard to regulating labour migration, including protecting the rights of our citizens.'[7] In between the lines, one can read in this sentence a certain disappointment with Russia, where Tajik migrants have been notoriously discriminated against, not only by society, but also by law enforcement bodies.

The negative consequences of economic dependence on Russia have become visible on multiple occasions. The example of two Russian pilots from 2011 is a case in point. The pilots were working for a Russian airline company and performed some tasks in Afghanistan. On the way from Kabul to Russia, they stopped over in Tajikistan where they were arrested for lacking necessary authorisation for the transfer. In response to this arrest, the Russian government took revenge on Tajik migrants working in Russia. After several hundreds of migrants had either been arrested or deported, the Tajik authorities immediately released the pilots.[8] This illustrates that Tajikistan's relations with Russia are asymmetric, with Russia having the upper hand, and that economic dependence seriously limits the autonomy of decision-making in Tajikistan.

If previously Tajik policymakers had benefitted from close relations with Russia, over time it became clear that such an excessive reliance was imprudent and that there was a price to pay. This might be the reason why Tajikistan hesitated for so long to join the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, even though it had already been formally invited to join the organisation in 2014, when it was founded. Despite trying to navigate its dependence, in the third phase Tajikistan could no longer disentangle itself from Russia.



STAGE 4 SINCE 2022: CARVING OUT SMALL SPACES TO MANOEUVRE

The power hierarchies between Tajikistan and Russia became even more acute after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This event marked the beginning of the most recent, fourth stage of Tajikistan's foreign policy towards Russia. As a result of several overlapping sources of dependence, with the most relevant one concerning mass labour migration, Tajik policymakers currently have no choice but to remain loyal to Russia. It is no longer a matter of a natural liking or geopolitical preference, but rather a state of affairs that cannot be changed. Nevertheless, it would not be accurate to assume that Tajikistan is fully deprived of agency in this clearly asymmetric relation with Russia. Instead of supporting Russia in the pursuit of its war in Ukraine, as Russia clearly expected, Tajik policymakers chose to remain silent on this event. In a situation when opposing Russia was impossible, and supporting Russia's war might have resulted in the country falling under Western sanctions, silence needs to be seen as a strategic narrative.[9] Given that declaring neutrality would not be enough to satisfy conflicting expectations of both Russia and the West, Tajik policymakers decided to ignore this war, as if they were not aware that it was taking place. The country's high-level politicians have thus issued no single statement in which they would mention the war in Ukraine directly, let alone express a stance on it.

In his Ramadan speech in April 2022, Emomali Rahmon only indirectly alluded to the war by saying that 'this year will be the most difficult and complicated for humanity in every respect, particularly when it comes to food security.'[10] Referring in this way to Western sanctions against Russia and pointing to the impact that they will have on Tajikistan's economy which relies on the Russian market, he urged citizens to stockpile food. While he mentioned domestic consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian war for Tajikistan, he refrained from a judgment on the war itself.

Russia, however, on several occasions has tried to pressure Tajikistan into deciding where it stands. Some high-level Russian politicians asserted that they had discussed the war in Ukraine with Tajik policymakers, implying in this way that Dushanbe was on the same page with Russia. For example, during a high-level visit to Dushanbe which overlapped with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Chairwoman of the Federation Council of Russia's Federal Assembly, Valentina Matviyenko, stated that she informed President Rahmon, as she said, 'about the situation concerning Ukraine.'[11] The Tajik MFA ignored this statement and did not position itself in any way vis-à-vis these comments. Similarly, on the occasion of a meeting of CIS foreign ministers in Dushanbe in May 2022, the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Russia, Sergey Lavrov, informed the journalists that politicians who were present at the meeting supposedly condemned Western sanctions against Russia. As he said: 'together with our

Belarusian, Kazakh and other colleagues, we expressed our rejection of those unilateral actions that are aimed at the collapse of existing economic, trade, logistics and transport ties.’[12] In this case, too, the Tajik MFA did not reply to this claim, and instead simply ignored it.

While avoiding taking sides, Tajik policymakers have attempted to maximise benefits from their silence by making clear to their Russian counterparts that such a passive stance also has a price, even if only a small one. This approach became visible at the Russia-Central Asia summit in Astana in October 2022 when, during a plenary session, Emomali Rahmon unexpectedly deferred from his prepared speech. To the surprise of other heads of state present in the room, he questioned the value of such regional meetings and spontaneously addressed Vladimir Putin by remarking: ‘You’ll have to forgive me for saying this, but then [in Soviet times] as now, no attention has been paid to the small republics, the small countries.’[13] In this way, by asking Russia for more ‘attention’ he made clear that Tajikistan expected more economic investment from Russia. This case exemplifies that although Tajik policymakers realise that disentangling from Russia is not feasible, they still want the interests of Tajikistan to be considered. Moreover, realising Russia’s weak position internationally due to sanctions and isolation by the West, they used this moment to openly demand more funding from Russia.

To sum up, in the fourth stage of its foreign policy towards Russia Tajikistan realises and accepts Russia’s upper hand, while still carving up small spaces to manoeuvre. The country recognises its limited agency in international politics. At the same time, the policymakers know that an asymmetric relation with Russia can be symbiotic and ultimately even somewhat beneficial for a small, peripheral state like Tajikistan.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined the main characteristics of the four stages of Tajikistan’s policy towards Russia. To summarise, in the first stage in the 1990s in the context of the civil war, Tajik policymakers were actively seeking Russia’s support. Backing from the Soviet successor state allowed the Tajik pro-government forces to gain the upper hand in the domestic conflict. This explains the gratitude that characterised Tajikistan’s foreign policy towards Russia after the war. In turn, in the second stage in 2000s, Tajikistan continued to prioritise Russia. This was despite an open-door foreign policy that the country adopted to attract attention and funding from Western countries. However, the negative consequences of an excessive reliance on Russia, especially in the economic sphere, gradually became visible when Dushanbe’s decision-making autonomy was compromised by Russia.

Nonetheless, at that point Tajikistan's subordinated status vis-à-vis Russia could hardly be mitigated due to the fact that Russia was the destination of over one million Tajik labour migrants. This explains why in the third stage in the 2010s, Tajik policymakers attempted to maintain positive relations with Russia. Yet while performing loyalty, resentment kept growing at home.

The hierarchical nature of Tajikistan-Russian relations became obvious in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022, when Russia took Tajikistan's support for its war for granted. However, realising that taking Russia's stance would result in Tajikistan's isolation in the international arena, a withdrawal of Western development aid, and potentially also sanctions, the country's elites opted for strategic silence on the war. In this most recent, fourth stage, Tajikistan realises that it cannot turn its back on Russia and whether it wants it or not, it remains in Russia's sphere of influence. But this subordinated position does not preclude small acts of subversion, in an attempt to gain some benefits from the fact that Russia has been isolated by the West and is in need of even such small partners as Tajikistan. If over the last thirty years it was Tajikistan that listened to Russia, now Russia has at least noticed that Tajikistan is present in the room.

In terms of broader implications, the evolution of Tajikistan's foreign policy towards Russia reveals three general characteristics of this country's foreign policymaking. Regarding the *who* dimension, there is a very small number of actors who shape foreign policy processes and decisions. These mainly include the president, high-level MFA officials and a state research institution, the Centre for Strategic Studies, which reports directly to the presidential administration. Foreign policymaking in Tajikistan is a hermetic process because it takes place without the involvement of external policy experts, lobbyists, non-governmental organisations or think tanks. As for the *why* dimension, specific foreign policy directions result from a careful consideration of the historical context, as well as current developments at home and abroad. Foreign policy decisions result from a careful consideration of actual opportunities and constraints at several domestic, regional and international levels. Finally, concerning the *how* dimension, Tajikistan's foreign policymaking is reactive rather than proactive. This reflects the country's limited agency in international politics. In other words, Tajikistan constantly adapts to external developments in world politics, rather than taking an initiative and actively shaping them. Foreign policymaking is rational, strategic and largely performative in that Tajik policymakers try to simultaneously please different international partners whose interests are not always compatible, without making their own stance clear.

NOTES

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