Taliban border guards in Nusai, Badakhshan, Afghanistan May 11, 2023 (Photo by Franz J. Marty / The Diplomat)

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The Taliban’s Qosh Tepa Canal Disguises A New Potential Conflict

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When local Taliban fighters living in Kabul were interviewed by the Afghanistan Analysts Network last year, they expressed a general distaste for their new domestic life. Despite the relative peacefulness, working government jobs was an uncomfortable change of pace from the days of the jihad insurgency and the madrasa. Afghanistan has a growing population of 40 million people—more than most Central Asian countries—and the Taliban leadership has been hard-pressed to build infrastructural support, exacerbating famine and poverty. To combat this, Kabul is strengthening its diplomatic ties with foreign countries and eagerly awaiting major development projects like the Chabahar port. But despite Kabul's influence expanding, for some of the Taliban leadership, civil society is still tempered by recent memories of the jihad.

And the potential for conflict is growing, partly due to the Central Asian water crisis. By 2028, the Taliban is set to complete its construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal, diverting Amu Darya river water away from Central Asian countries downstream. The project, although providing economic and political power to Kabul, will flare tensions with Central Asian countries that are hard-pressed to fight desertification. The canal project is also creating a regional conundrum for foreign actors like Russia and China, and US options for guaranteeing water security are limited. The highest chance for regional conflict seems to be in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast in eastern Tajikistan. How could such a conflict start?

Tajikistan, The Canal, and The Crisis

The Aral Sea near Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is shrinking, floods in Uzbekistan are expected to turn into droughts in the coming years, and regional irrigation practices use dwindling water resources––these are just some of the compounding factors in the Central Asian water crisis. Countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have significantly more water than Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and even Uzbekistan. Yet Tajikistan, specifically, is threatened. The diversion of water via the Qosh Tepa Canal will affect Tajikistan most immediately, although in the long term it will cause further depletion in the Aral Sea downstream. Turkmenistan will also feel the effects of the Qosh Tepa Canal; after all, 97 percent of its water flows from outside its borders. But Tajikistan, a strategically important nation for many foreign actors, relies on critical hydropower plants to be inevitably affected by lowered water levels. Despite its natural glaciers, Tajikistan lacks infrastructural support.

Photo of the Qosh Tepa Canal (Photo by Ariana News)

Instead of relying on foreign investments, the Taliban will self-finance the project, meaning it will take longer and exclude the leverage of foreign investors. The Qosh Tepa Canal will provide humanitarian relief to Afghanistan and economic advantage. For example, the canal is reportedly subject to salinity issues, providing an economic opportunity for countries like China interested in harvesting salt. Bringing in international partners could improve technical support, helping the Taliban avoid saline soil and also boosting Kabul's agricultural sector and its exports.

Reaping economic benefits by irrigating Northern Afghanistan's provinces is not the Taliban's only goal; they also seek to extend political power beyond Afghanistan's borders. This is encouraged by the Taliban's lack of participation in many regional quota agreements. For example, Afghanistan never participated in the 1992 Almaty Agreement, an upgrade of a previous Soviet-era allocation of water to Central Asian countries. Although plenty of regional water allocation agreements and partnerships in Central Asia have ultimately failed to prevent the crisis from developing, Kabul's lack of participation permits it to ignore quotas and force other countries to make economic and political concessions. Countries like Turkmenistan, which is further downstream, will probably have to renegotiate their quotas with upstream countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Historically, Afghanistan has been left out of various negotiations due to its own internal conflicts and low water usage.

The Taliban's Gamble in Northern Afghanistan

Why would the Taliban risk its relationships with other Central Asian countries, especially when some of them, like Kabul's relationship with Kazakhstan, have recently strengthened? Analysts have already noted the canal's potentially dire consequences for regional tensions. Although international cooperation on the canal has been suggested in the past as a potential hedge against Taliban aggression, that opportunity has disappeared now that the project is private. Securitization of the Qosh Tepa canal is also a top priority; the Taliban have reportedly created a special unit guarding it.

The Taliban, meanwhile, claims the project will provide relief to marginalized populations in northern Afghanistan. Northern Afghanistan has historically been filled with resistance groups like the National Resistance Front (NRF) and is also home to numerous ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks, with Tajiks being the second-largest ethnic group in Afghanistan besides Pashtuns. Providing relief to minorities in northern Afghanistan could be complemented by increased calls by the Taliban to liberate oppressed Muslim Tajiks across the border. The Taliban, already destabilizing Tajikistan by depleting its water access, could easily exacerbate tensions with Dushanbe toward the brink of conflict. Northern Afghanistan shares a porous border with Tajikistan, but the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast would be the most likely target of Taliban-supported destabilization. The Tajik government has been more adversarial toward the Taliban than other Central Asian countries, with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon positioning himself as the "guardian and patron of all Tajiks in the world," including those in Afghanistan.

Targeting the Gorno-Badakhshan

Khorog, Tajikistan (Photo by Aga Khan Foundation)

The autonomous region has faced repression by the Tajik government in recent years and historically has bred terrorism and crime. Although Gorno-Badakhshan composes nearly 40 percent of Tajikistan, it remains sparsely populated. Notably, it is largely powered by hydropower plants.

Gorno-Badakhshan hosts a Pamiri population, Shiite Muslims surrounded by Sunni Muslims. Tajikistan has recently taken steps to repress these communities, indiscriminately arresting them for alleged extremism. Those actions are reflected on the national stage. For example, Dushanbe made headlines last month after the parliament banned hijabs, despite a Muslim majority in the country. Dushanbe is anxious to secure its porous borders with Afghanistan and even Iran, particularly after the recent Moscow attacks by Tajik citizens linked to the Afghanistan-based Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) on March 22. The Gorno-Badakhshan, in particular, promises recruits for regional militant groups, preying on poor religious river valley communities. Local activist voices advocating for autonomy have faced repression by the Tajik government, further encouraging resentment toward Dushanbe as it adopts measures to curb Islam.

Militants and a Porous Border

More and more, the Taliban holds Tajikistan responsible for domestic opposition movements. Recently, on July 9th, alleged NRF and ISKP plotters were arrested by the Taliban, who claimed that the plotters had Tajik coordinators. But that accusation pales in comparison to the Taliban's Defense Minister, Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid, who claimed in December that attacks in 2023 were "all carried out by foreigners, especially the citizens of Tajikistan." Because of that narrative, a Taliban-led push to destabilize the Gorno-Badakhshan could be framed by Kabul in two ways: firstly, as an attempt to liberate oppressed Muslim peoples, and secondly, as a way to fight separatist movements.

While the Taliban is unlikely to take direct action, they could utilize ethnic warlords and militants in northern Afghanistan.

Tajik militant Muhammad Sharifov (center) raising the Taliban flag near Afghanistan's border with Tajikistan in June, 2021. (Photo from social media / RFE/RL)

One such warlord, Mahdi Arsalon (also known as Muhammad Sharifov), is a Tajik national raised in a river valley until his recruitment into Jamaat Ansarullah, a Badakhshan-based Tajik Islamist splinter group, in 2014. A few months before the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021, Arsalon and his militants, several of whom were Tajiks, were handed control of several of Afghanistan's northern border provinces by the Taliban, a move that raised eyebrows. Although Jamaat Ansarullah formed as a Tajik version of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the militant group has since been reformed into the Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan (TTT) in 2022. The current goal of the TTT, which has evolved over the years, seems primarily to combat NRF and ISKP forces in Northern Afghanistan. And although Arsalon has reportedly been missing since sometime around the start of 2023, his appointment by the Taliban to secure northern Afghanistan shows their willingness to utilize warlords. Tajik Intelligence reportedly claimed that the Taliban supports the TTT, accusations that Kabul can always deny.

The situation is worsened by an unsecured border. Although Tajikistan has worked hard to secure its border, it may not be enough. A report by journalist Franz J. Marty in May 2023 found massively ill-equipped Tajik and Taliban border forces.

Foreign Actors in Gorno-Badakhshan

The region continues to attract the interest of foreign actors. Beijing, for example, is very interested in the area due to the border it shares with the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and the highway that Beijing hopes to build through it. Tajikistan is a strategically vital location for any interests in the region. Russia and the United States have also assisted in securing the Tajik-Afghan border, often holding joint military drills prior to the end of the US war in Afghanistan. Recently, reports broke of a Chinese military base being constructed in Tajikistan in the hopes of deterring Taliban northern expansion, but both Beijing and Dushanbe have denied the allegations.

To secure its southeastern border, Tajikistan could feel compelled to do two things. Firstly, it could establish an even stronger presence in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast and crack down even further on Islamic communities, which would be met with strong religious and political resistance in addition to international condemnation. Secondly, a country like China could assist with Tajikistan's security.

Two Taliban border guards near the Afghan-Tajik border marked by the Panj River, Maimai District, Badakhshan, Afghanistan, May 14, 2023 (Photo by Franz J. Marty / The Diplomat)

But that would be a paradox for Beijing for multiple reasons. To start, it could involve action on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, which Beijing wants to avoid. And although it would further secure the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and even send a message to Pakistani militants, it could be met with internal resistance. Beijing's strategy in Central Asia is to win the hearts of the people through massive investments, wishing to avoid being seen as a debt trap. Beijing wouldn't storm into Tajikistan with guns blazing, but instead, it would bolster security indirectly through the use of Chinese or Hong Kong-based Private Security Companies (PSCs). For example, to protect its image, Beijing currently attempts to secure its projects in Pakistan and Central Asia via local security forces set up and equipped by the PSCs. Any conventional military action by China could risk its relationship with Kabul, which so far Beijing has been anxious to protect in the interest of the potential resources it could access. Perhaps most importantly of all, any direct action by China could risk its narrative as a country that does not interfere in the domestic situation of a country and risk entangling it in a never-ending conflict.

Russia, likewise, is developing a relationship with the Taliban but has more reason to side with Tajikistan. As Paul Goble at the Jamestown Foundation recently noted, Moscow probably suspects independence movements in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast will encourage Russian dissident voices. Not only that, but Russia currently has one military base in Tajikistan that it needs to protect.

What's Next?

Tajikistan cannot be ignored by Central Asian countries or the world. It has strategic significance within Asia as a whole, and the potential for a political crisis in Dashunbe is high. Domestic unrest could be stirred up as the Tajik election in 2025 approaches. The Taliban likely realizes this––they have much to gain by taking advantage of Tajikistan's autonomous region. Undoubtedly, the Taliban will use the Qosh Tepa Canal as geopolitical leverage. Afghanistan hosting militant groups is a well-documented phenomenon, and the Taliban could easily use these groups in proxy conflicts, satisfying Taliban members who seek to support Islamic goals *outside* of Afghanistan's borders. The international community should pay close attention not only to the TTT but also to any skirmishes in northern Afghanistan involving Tajiks. These skirmishes, after all, could spark larger conflicts. Additionally, if nations like the US supported water treatment and other infrastructural projects, not only in Afghanistan but in Central Asia as a whole, this could ease the crisis while also giving political leverage.

A road sign near the Afghan-Tajik border crossing (Photo by Klas Lundström / The Diplomat)

These security developments near the Afghan-Tajik border come as the Taliban still fights for international recognition, a battle that it may be starting to win. Afghan refugees have recently begun to flow en masse back into Afghanistan after fleeing the war. Pakistan, wary of terrorist threats, has deported thousands of migrants. The UN recently called for the deportations to end, but Kabul also said it welcomes all returning refugees. In talks with the UN, the Taliban stressed Afghanistan's need for economic prosperity to effect any lasting humanitarian change. Plenty of reasons exist for the Taliban to avoid conflict near its borders. For example, migrants returning to Afghanistan don't want to come back to a region filled with conflicts, and Kabul taking any direct action against Tajikistan would be condemned by its neighbors. Yet paradoxically, international recognition could also encourage the government to expand its influence via conflict.

Yesterday, the Deputy Prime Minister of the Islamic Emirate said they have complete control over all Afghan provinces and no longer face a meaningful opposition threat. He emphasized that for the Taliban, the jihad is over in Afghanistan. The question is, will Kabul set its sights on its neighbors next?

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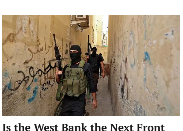

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