

Taxkorgan airport, the new battleground between China and Russia?

Description

On April 26, 2020, the autonomous government of Xinjiang launched the airport construction in Taxkorgan, a city bordering Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. According to the Chinese government, the airport is intended to promote tourism throughout the region. However, the choice of location seems to have quite different objectives.

Although they remain primarily under Moscow's influence, Central Asian countries have seen China's economic projects and massive investments become increasingly important in their landscape in recent years. Recently, China has begun to develop strategic programs in the region. Central Asia is now seen as a new tension zone between the two great powers: Russia is trying to consolidate its previously dominant position, while China is steadily expanding its influence.

Taxkorgan airport construction attracts attention from neighboring countries.

Just as the COVID-19 pandemic was capturing everyone's attention, the Chinese government launched the construction of Taxkorgan Airport on April 26, 2020⁽¹⁾. Located 13 kilometers from the town of Taxkorgan, in the eponymous Tajik Autonomous District (Chinese Xinjiang), and at an altitude of 3,252 meters, it will be allocated a total budget of 1.3 billion yuan (around 180 million euros) by the regional government, supported by the central government. According to official reports, the airport is intended to link Urumqi, Aksu, and other major cities in the Uyghur Autonomous Region. It plans to open flights to major cities such as Beijing, Shenzhen, and Xi'an. The aims are to promote local tourism, stimulate the autonomous region's economy, and attract investment to develop local infrastructure.

Although Taxkorgan, located in the Pamir, can be reached by bus from Kashgar after a five-hour drive, this destination, despite its idyllic surroundings and scenic beauty, has never been popular with Chinese tourists, who much prefer to travel to countries with luxurious infrastructures such as Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the European states. The number of Chinese tourists in the region is deficient, not to mention destinations close to Taxkorgan, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. On the face of it, therefore, the idea of developing tourism there seems somewhat unrealistic.

Doubt is also cast on a report published in February 2019 by the Washington Post⁽²⁾ that China is stationing troops in eastern Tajikistan. The garrison would be located in the autonomous province of Nagorno-Badakhshan, adjacent to the Wakhan corridor on the border between China, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. To refute this information, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs held a press conference the day after the article was published. The Tajik government also denied the existence of the garrison, although a Chinese soldier confirmed its existence in a subsequent Washington Post interview in the Tajik town of Murghab. Taxkorgan airport is just across the border, near this military base.

China and its New Silk Road

China's New Silk Road initiative, launched in 2013, is changing the landscape of global geopolitics. This is particularly evident in Central Asia. China has set up numerous investment programs in the region's five countries: construction of roads and railroads, commercial centers, investment in industrial centers, etc. In exchange, the Central Asia-China gas pipeline and the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, installed by China, now supply the country with natural gas and oil.



According to a report by the official Chinese media Xinhuanet, the China-Kazakhstan pipeline delivered almost 11 million tonnes of oil to China in 2019 alone. China has also become the leading importer of Turkmen liquefied petroleum gas (99% of its production is exported to China)⁽³⁾. As Iran and Russia have gradually withdrawn from the Turkmen market (Iran due to non-payment and Russia because it considered the price of LPG too high), China has now monopolized the Turkmen resource export market.

Tajikistan is also one of the five Central Asian countries most dependent on the Chinese economy. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, in office since 1992, is a former local Communist Party official and Kolkhoz chairman in Soviet times. As a result, Tajik and Chinese leaders get along quickly and have no trouble reaching an economic and political consensus. Over the past few years, Chinese companies have gradually established a foothold in Tajikistan, virtually controlling the country's economy. For example, most of the country's gold and silver mines are now owned by Chinese companies⁽⁴⁾, which, in return, have built infrastructure in Dushanbe. Similarly, 53% of Tajikistan's total foreign debt is held by China, far higher than Kyrgyzstan's 41%. Indirectly, this explains why the Tajik government has accepted the installation of a Chinese garrison within its borders and why it is willing to cooperate with the Chinese army to conduct joint military exercises in the Upper Badakhshan region.

Will the Sino-Russian relationship change?

Although Moscow lost its direct control over the countries of Central Asia after the dissolution of the USSR, the region remains greatly influenced by Russia in economic, political, military, cultural, and linguistic terms. To help maintain stability, both China and Russia have fulfilled their roles over the past two decades: China manages regional economic activities and investments, while Russia dominates regional military security. Therefore, the interests of the two parties do not conflict, and each uses its assets to maintain stability and enhance its interests. However, China's ambitions have increased with the Silk Road: they now touch on the military sphere, which means a breach in the tacit agreement between the two countries.

Today, Russia is also facing numerous difficulties, caught between a deterioration in its relationship with Western countries since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the mobilization implied by its commitment to the Middle East. China, on the other hand, could prove to be a relatively stable partner.

The problem is that China's ambitions are growing on Russia's doorstep as it seeks to increase its military power there. Joint Chinese-Tajik military exercises take place regularly, and Chinese military camps have been set up on the Tajik border. Moreover, in August 2016, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan agreed on the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM). This regional security system excludes Russia for the first time since the end of the USSR. Could China be testing the line with Russia?

A counterweight to China?

The conflict between China and India that began in June 2020 has unexpectedly highlighted the importance of Sino-Russian relations. Although the Russian President's Press Secretary, Dmitry Peskov, stressed at a press conference on June 17 that China and India were essential partners for Russia, this did not prevent Russia from selling India 33 bomber aircraft for \$24.3 billion on July 2, 2020. This agreement can manifest Russia's need for a reliable strategic partner in Asia that does not jeopardize its strategic security and enables it to maintain a balance vis-à-vis China. India appears to be a less threatening partner than China regarding economic or military power, despite criticism from Beijing, which regards the sale as an unacceptable betrayal.

Russia recently moved closer to Mongolia, hoping the latter could act as a buffer zone between the two powers. In the summer of 2020, the Russian Duma and Federation Council ratified a treaty of friendship and strategic partnership with Mongolia, a country Russia has also invited to join the CSTO. This offer could pose a real threat to China: Russia could then organize joint military exercises with Mongolia and, in particular, equip the country with Iskander missiles, a model capable of loading nuclear warheads.

While there is no open conflict between China and Russia, the nature of their relationship has gradually changed. Central Asia has become the regional protagonists' diplomatic, economic, and strategic battleground. At a time when Russia is facing multiple crises, China is taking advantage of its economic assets and high-potential domestic market and is trying to gain the upper hand in a region that Russia has dominated for decades. While maintaining friendly relations with China, Russia is taking steps to deal with the threats Beijing could pose in the future. Initially only latent, the region's competition between these two great powers has intensified.

Notes:

(1) Ma Yining, « 新疆机场建设启动 » (Construction begins on Xinjian's first high-attitude airport), *Xinjian Daily*, April 26, 2020.

(2) Gerry Smith, "In Central Asia's forbidding highlands, a quiet newcomer: Chinese troops," *The Washington Post*, February 19, 2019.

(3) The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC).

(4) Dirk van der Kely, "The Full Story Behind China's Gold Mine-Power Plant Swap in Tajikistan," *The Diplomat*, April 14, 2018.

Thumbnail: The Taxkorgan region (source: Wikimedia Commons/Hiroooooo).

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