

Tajikistan's Opposition to the Taliban: Rhetoric or Threat?

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Summary

Dilemmas over conferring recognition to the Taliban and security uncertainties following the fall of Kabul continue to perturb the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Escalating tensions between Tajikistan and the Taliban have prompted both sides to increase their military forces along their shared border, fearing invasion from the other. Tajikistan is the sole CAR that has taken a vociferously anti-Taliban stance and refuses to engage with the new Taliban-led government. The discord has elicited concerns from Russia and Pakistan that a confrontation might ensue, disrupting regional stability.

In the final days of September 2021, Tajikistan and the Taliban had [multiple heated exchanges of words](#) in public statements and on social media. Speaking before the United Nations General Assembly on 23 September 2021, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon [denounced](#) the Taliban for failing to form an inclusive government and violating human rights in the Panjshir Valley fighting. The Taliban retaliated by warning Tajikistan not to interfere in Afghanistan's internal matters.

Several days later, Rahmon oversaw military parades in parts of its Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region bordering Afghanistan. Earlier in September 2021, he [posthumously awarded](#) the nation's highest honour, the Order of Ismoili Somoni, to two Tajik Afghan figures – Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud and former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani. Tajikistan has also [provided refuge](#) to prominent Afghan resistance figures. Notably, Ahmad Massoud, the leader of Afghanistan's National Resistance Front and son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, currently reside in Dushanbe after losing to the Taliban in Panjshir Valley. These gestures of recognition and succour for the Afghan resistance underscore Tajikistan's refusal to give in to the Taliban.

Consequentially, the Taliban has reportedly [supplied](#) new military vehicles and weaponry to Tajik militants operating in Badakhshan along the Tajik-Afghan border. These actions have drawn concerns from Russia and Pakistan. Alexei Zaitsev, deputy spokesman for the Russian foreign ministry stated that [Russia](#) is monitoring the situation and has asked for both parties to seek "mutually acceptable solutions." Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan [spoke on the phone](#) with Rahmon two days later regarding Afghanistan, presumably to defuse tensions.

Dushanbe's opposition to the Taliban is not new. Throughout the years, it has repeatedly chastised the Taliban for terrorist activities and mistreatment of ethnic Tajiks. Alongside Russia, Tajikistan previously supported the Northern Alliance to fight against the Taliban. Dushanbe's main security concerns stem from sharing a border of over 1,400 kilometres with Afghanistan. While major checkpoints are secure, smaller outposts are harder to watch and manage, resulting in [relative porosity](#) which has allowed illegal drug trade to thrive and fighters to find shelter on both sides. [Russia](#) and [the United States](#) have been assisting the Tajik government in strengthening border forces to better tackle security threats.

Behind Tajikistan's hostility towards the Taliban, there are a few layers to unpeel. First, Rahmon's support for ethnic Tajiks, who constitute a sizeable portion of the Afghan resistance, to be included into the Taliban-led government could be part of a [“rebranding” effort to garner domestic support](#) for his unpopular leadership. Correspondingly, it could be a strategic ploy to [attract international aid](#) into Tajikistan whose economy has been exacerbated by the pandemic. By aligning anti-Taliban rhetoric with the international response to Afghanistan, Rahmon may secure greater international support. The [European Union](#) has already pledged cash, reportedly worth €600 million (\$945 million), for Afghanistan's neighbours to host refugees. Tajikistan has recent interactions with the European Council, and Rahmon has been invited to visit Paris by French President Emmanuel Macron, who [met](#) Ahmad Massoud in March 2021.

Furthermore, Dushanbe fears that if the Taliban succeeds in building an Islamist government, radicalism will proliferate in the region. Since independence, Tajikistan has maintained that radical Islam constitutes a threat to its national security. The government pursues authoritarian-style secularism, imposing [tight controls on religion](#) such as prohibiting minors under the age of 18 from attending Friday prayers at the mosque and mandating religious organisations to report their activities to the state.

Over 90 per cent of Tajikistan's population is Muslim and growing religiosity has raised the government's concern about radicalism and losing influence to the Islamist parties. In 2015, Rahmon [declared](#) the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, one of the key groups that fought against the government during Tajikistan's Civil War (1992-1997), a terrorist group, preempting any attempt by the opposition parties to challenge his administration. In other words, Rahmon, who has been in power since 1992, has been intolerant towards Islamic movements and views the Taliban as a contemporary source of radicalism.

However, Dushanbe may be forced to change course soon if the surrounding states apply pressure. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the other two CARs bordering Afghanistan, are adopting different stances. [Uzbekistan](#) is looking to cooperate with the Collective Security Treaty Organization, from which it withdrew in 2012. [Turkmenistan](#), which has maintained impartiality in Afghanistan, met with Taliban representatives only three days after Kabul fell. [Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan](#) have lately established direct contact with the Taliban.

Interestingly, reports indicated that [the Afghan resistance in Dushanbe](#) is seeking Russian support to fight the Taliban. This is [unlikely to happen](#) as Moscow has reconciled that the Taliban will play an important role in Afghanistan and has increased its engagement with the new government. Given that Russia is unlikely to back Tajikistan's anti-Taliban stance, the present military build-up along the border is unlikely to turn into a full-scale conflict. Moving forward, Dushanbe may only play [a limited role](#) in pushing other countries to exert pressure on the Taliban to form an inclusive government.

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