Why Tajikistan Is Headed Toward Instability

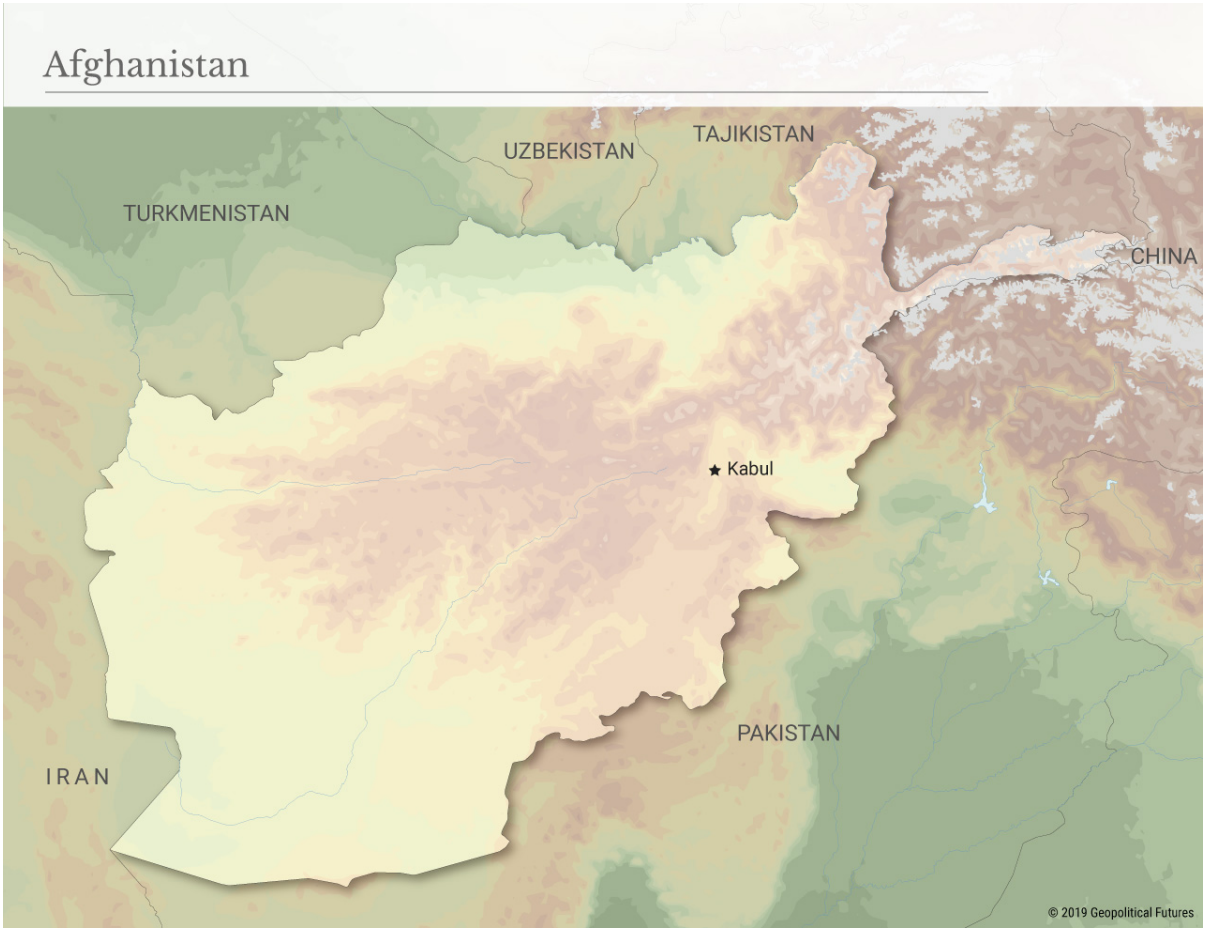
by Kamran Bokhari - January 9, 2023

On Dec. 27, the Islamic State's franchise in Afghanistan claimed responsibility for an attack that killed the highest-ranking Taliban security official in Badakhshan province, located on the border of Tajikistan. It was merely the latest incident in a series of accelerated attacks by the Islamic State since the Taliban retook control of the country.

It is especially concerning for Tajikistan, which is the most vulnerable of Afghanistan's neighbors to cross-border instability. It's little surprise, then, that in sharp contrast with the more pragmatic approaches of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (as well as Russia), Tajikistan has adopted a confrontational attitude toward the Taliban regime. The governments in Tashkent and Ashgabat along with the Kremlin have, for example, relied on the Taliban to keep the Islamic State from spreading into their respective territories. They figure that the Taliban, which is a nationalist jihadist group bent on creating an emirate limited to Afghanistan, is a natural counterweight to the more transnational ambitions of the Islamic State. Tajikistan shares this concern but, because of its historical and geopolitical connections, considers the Taliban a more immediate danger.

Cross-border Tensions

The influence of Afghanistan's Pashtun minorities on Pakistan is well documented – and for good reason. Pakistan shares a 1,640-mile (2,640-kilometer) border with Afghanistan, and ethnic Pashtuns make up about 42 percent of all Afghans and 18 percent of all Pakistanis, most of whom live on either side of the internationally recognized border between the two.



(click to enlarge)

The situation is similar with regard to Tajikistan, if only on a somewhat smaller scale. Ethnic Tajiks form Afghanistan's second-largest ethnic group (27 percent) and most of them inhabit the country's northern regions bordering Tajikistan, where Tajiks account for 84 percent of the population. The Tajik language is a variant of Dari, which binds together the various Afghan ethnicities.

The Russian Empire and, later, the Soviet Union created barriers that prevented the natural commingling of cultural and linguistic influences in borderlands such as these, but those began to erode during Moscow's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Tajikistan was the main launchpad for the deployment of Soviet forces. Moscow relied on its own ethnic Tajik citizens who, thanks to their ethnolinguistic connections to Afghanistan, helped it understand Afghan society and culture. Many served in the Soviet armed forces, of course, but many others adopted civilian roles as interpreters, advisers and technical experts to try to help Moscow improve the standing of the communist regime in Kabul among the broader Afghan population.

But all the while, Afghans were also influencing Soviet Tajiks, who found an opportunity to reconnect with their shared Persianate heritage. The experience helped them not just enhance their language skills but also revive their religious and ethno-nationalist identity, which had long been contained under Russian and Soviet rule. This was taking place at the same time that Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika reforms were creating the conditions for Tajikistan and other former Soviet republics to declare independence. The Tajikistani veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan played a role in the national and religious revival both in the lead-up to independence and afterward.

When Tajikistan declared independence in September 1991, Afghan Islamist insurgent groups were trying to topple the communist regime in Kabul. One of the most powerful factions was Jamiat-e-Islami, an ethnic Tajik Islamist group led by former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani and former military commander and Defense Minister Ahmad Shah Massoud. This group would have a significant impact on Tajikistan's domestic political scene and the country's relations with Afghanistan. Within three weeks of the collapse of Afghanistan's communist regime in April 1992, Tajikistan plunged into a civil war that raged for five years.

Two simultaneous conflicts thus emerged. In Afghanistan, after the collapse of the communist regime, opposing factions unable to reach a power-sharing arrangement began to fight each other in a chaotic intra-Islamist war from which the Taliban would eventually emerge victorious. In Tajikistan, protests against the newly independent state dominated by former Soviet elites quickly descended into a full-scale civil war. The opposition consisted of democratic and Islamist factions hailing largely from the highland regions of the center and southeast, while pro-government factions comprised the lowland areas in the north and southwestern parts of the country.

Southern Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan essentially became a contiguous battlespace. Which makes sense – historically, these two regions were effectively the same area, as evidenced by the fact that large parts of territory on both sides of the border are called Badakhshan. Afghanistan's Badakhshan province was a stronghold of the Tajik-dominated Jamiat-e-Islami, which was embroiled in a conflict between anti-Soviet guerilla factions for control following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since the fighting was taking place in Kabul, Jamiat-e-Islami could participate in the power struggle at home and help its allies in Tajikistan fight their own government. It offered sanctuary, weapons, supplies and training to the Tajikistani opposition, and there is even evidence that Afghan veterans of the war against the Soviets participated in Tajikistan's civil war. (It helped that Jamiat-e-Islami's senior leaders likewise occupied civil and military spots in the rump state in Kabul.)

Decline of the Afghan Tajiks

1994 would prove a significant year for both countries. In Afghanistan, the Taliban emerged on the scene, and in just two years, it would topple the fragile Jamiat-e-Islami-led government. (Jamiat-e-Islami would then retreat and band together with various other groups to form the Northern Alliance.) Meanwhile, in Tajikistan, the government – led by President Emomali Rahmon, who occupies the office still today – had begun to gain the upper hand in the war against what had become the United Tajik Opposition alliance.

With the Rahmon government in Dushanbe pushing UTO southward, and with the Taliban driving the Northern Alliance northward, the cross-border battlespace began to shrink, leading to a realignment in an area where ethnicity trumped ideology and accelerating negotiations between the government and the UTO. The Afghan Tajik movement's priority was to defend itself against the Taliban, and it could no longer help the UTO. In fact, Jamiat-e-Islami actually facilitated the peace talks between UTO and the government in Tajikistan – which helped end the conflict there.

Jamiat-e-Islami, which was losing territory to the Taliban, was forced to rely on Dushanbe and Moscow. (It was an ironic turn of events; the group went from fighting the Russians in the 1980s to being clients of them in the 1990s.) Once again, Tajikistan became the springboard for military operations in Afghanistan, only this time it was a Russian-backed Islamist faction fighting a rival and much more hardline Islamist opponent. Even so, by the early 2000s, it seemed that the Taliban were well on their way to consolidating power in Afghanistan, particularly with al-Qaida assassinating Massoud on Sept. 9, 2001.

Two days later, the 9/11 attacks took place, which would change the cross-border landscape again. The U.S. operation to remove the Taliban regime shifted the battlespace well south of the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border. For the next two decades, the American intervention, along with the fact that Afghanistan's ethnic Tajiks were in dominant positions in the Western-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan regime, insulated not just Tajikistan but the broader Central Asian region from the ravages of the subsequent Taliban insurgency. The Taliban knew that the mainstay of the opposition to them was ethnic Tajiks in the north.

After all, the Tajik-majority northern region is where the Taliban faced resistance for years after taking control in 1996 and was the launchpad of the ground offensive that toppled the regime in late 2001. The Taliban also understood the cross-border ethnic Tajik phenomenon and the critical role Tajikistan played as a strategic rear guard for their enemies. They knew that it was only a matter of time before the Americans would withdraw from the country and give them the opportunity to retake Kabul. But what they did not want was to return to a situation where the Tajiks and their allies in the

north would be a constant threat.

Looking Ahead

For this reason, the Taliban began expanding their insurgency in the north, taking advantage of the public dissatisfaction with warlordism, factionalism and corruption that had emerged among the old Afghan Tajik elite during the U.S. military presence, especially after the Taliban assassinated Rabbani in 2011. The broader infighting within the internationally backed Afghan state after the 2014 elections only helped the Taliban more. By **mid-2016**, five years before they retook the country, the Taliban had already gained significant ground in 12 of the 22 provinces of Badakhshan, among other areas in the north. This was an unprecedented development; for the first time, the Taliban had been able to penetrate the region of their historic rivals.

And so, when in the summer of 2021 the Taliban seized Kabul, they did so only after first taking most of the north. Unlike when they took power in 1996, this time they eliminated the possibility of major resistance from the Tajiks. Consequently, they deprived Tajikistan of the buffer that had long existed between Tajikistan and the Taliban-controlled southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan. More important, the Taliban are in a position to leverage the trans-border ethno-linguistic demographics to undermine the Tajikistani government.

Hence the hardline stance Dushanbe has adopted toward the Taliban. Rahmon, who has led the country for almost 30 years, has personally witnessed the geopolitical ebb and flow between his country and Afghanistan since the Soviet era. This emerging threat on the southern flank comes at the worst possible time as the Rahmon government faces growing economic difficulties and sees the weakening of longtime ally Russia.

The Taliban's stance toward Tajikistan is similar to its attitude toward Pakistan. It may not be seeking to act against either neighbor, but trans-border dynamics are such that the Taliban cannot secure their regime without buffer zones. In the case of Pakistan, they don't have much to worry about; Islamabad is somewhere between ambivalent and sympathetic toward the new government in Kabul. However, Tajikistan's opposition to the Taliban regime means that they will actively try to undermine security north of the border. Tajikistan is thus headed for instability, which has the potential to spread to neighboring Uzbekistan and the wider region.

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