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THE SHIFT IN TAJIKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN



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THE SHIFT IN TAJIKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN

Introduction

Among Afghanistan's neighboring countries, Tajikistan was the only one that adopted a relatively hostile stance following the return of the Islamic Emirate to power. Dushanbe openly demonstrated its opposition by providing refuge to opponents of the Islamic Emirate—commonly referred to as the National Resistance Front—on its soil, while simultaneously criticizing the Emirate's resurgence and accusing it of supporting militant groups.

On several occasions, Tajikistan's president even revived his earlier proposal for establishing a "security belt" around Afghanistan, an idea first introduced in the 1990s, purportedly aimed at preventing the spread of terrorism from Afghanistan to neighboring states. These actions reflected the deep mistrust that Tajikistan harbored toward the Islamic Emirate's rule in Afghanistan.

The policy that Dushanbe pursued over the past three years clearly indicated that the country was not willing to engage in constructive relations with the Islamic Emirate. However, over the past year, Tajikistan appears to have gradually shifted away from its previous position, as signs of a changing attitude and behavior toward the Islamic Emirate have become evident.

This article examines the extent and nature of these indications and analyzes what they reveal about the evolving direction of Dushanbe's foreign policy toward the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, as well as the underlying factors and prospects of this shift.

INDICATORS OF TAJIKISTAN'S POLICY SHIFT TOWARD THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN

Over the past two years, Tajikistan has gradually and cautiously abandoned its confrontational stance toward the Islamic Emirate, signaling a willingness to re-engage and resume constructive interaction. The first clear indication of Dushanbe's departure from a "zero-engagement" policy came in April 2023 (Hamāl 1402), when Tajik authorities formally handed over the Consulate of Khorog—the capital of Tajikistan's Badakhshan Province—to representatives of the Islamic Emirate. This transfer demonstrated Tajikistan's readiness to initiate a new phase of practical engagement.

The second notable step was the reopening of cross-border trade markets between the two countries. These border markets—mainly located in Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province along the Tajik frontier—had initially been closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and, even after the pandemic subsided, remained shuttered following the Islamic Emirate's return to power. However, in mid-2023 (mid-1402), upon the directive of Tajikistan's president and in the presence of local officials from both sides, the markets were reopened. This reopening



reflected Dushanbe's renewed confidence in the stability and security of its border regions with Afghanistan.

A more significant development followed in mid-2024 (mid-1403), when Tajikistan dispatched one of its highest-ranking security officials, Saimumin Yatimov, the Chairman of the State Committee for National Security, to Kabul. Conducted with limited media coverage, this visit represented Dushanbe's most consequential move toward establishing direct contact with Kabul. According to available reports, Yatimov described his trip as "substantive." The tangible outcome of this visit emerged two months later, when Tajikistan accepted the accreditation of a diplomat from the Islamic Emirate at the Afghan Embassy in Dushanbe.

Another major signal of rapprochement came in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Kunar Province, when the Tajik government dispatched over 3,000 tons of humanitarian aid to the victims. The shipment included 24 categories of essential goods and supplies—such as flour, oil, sugar, rice, blankets, tents, clothing, and footwear for children and adults, as well as construction materials like rebar, planks, tiles, and cement for reconstruction efforts. This assistance, which can be interpreted as a form of conciliatory or humanitarian diplomacy, helped melt the ice that had long characterized the chilly relations between the two neighbors and paved the way for improved engagement.

Following this gesture of goodwill, Tajikistan extended an invitation to Mohammad Yusuf Wafa, the Governor of Balkh Province, to visit Dushanbe—an invitation that signified a fundamental reassessment of Tajikistan's strategy toward the Islamic Emirate. Although the official purpose of Governor Wafa's trip was to attend a joint meeting with Tajikistan's Ministry of Border Affairs, his senior position within the Islamic Emirate made the visit more than a routine exchange between provincial officials. Rather, it could be interpreted as a preliminary diplomatic outreach aimed at expanding high-level relations between the two countries in the future.

Concurrently, during the Third Conference of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) on Combating Terrorism and Extremism held in Dushanbe, a statement delivered on behalf of President Emomali Rahmon emphasized the importance of stability in Afghanistan as a key factor for ensuring the security of Tajikistan and the wider region. This rhetorical shift from the Tajik president further indicates that Dushanbe is in the process of charting a new roadmap for engagement with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

REASONS BEHIND TAJIKISTAN'S POLICY SHIFT TOWARD THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN

The reorientation of Tajikistan's foreign policy toward the Islamic Emirate can be analyzed through several interrelated factors:



1. The Islamic Emirate's Engagement-Oriented Foreign Policy

The first and perhaps most overlooked factor is the Islamic Emirate's consistent willingness to pursue constructive relations with Tajikistan. Despite Dushanbe's strong opposition to the Emirate—manifested through its vocal criticism and its provision of safe haven to anti-Emirate groups—the Islamic Emirate refrained from any retaliatory posture from the outset. Instead, it consistently emphasized its desire for peaceful and cooperative relations with its northern neighbor.

For instance, Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesperson of the Islamic Emirate, once stated: *"Tajikistan is our neighbor, and we wish to establish advanced relations with it. Our policy is to bring problems with our neighbors to zero, as all issues can only be resolved through dialogue."* This approach demonstrates that one side of the equation—namely, the willingness to engage—had already been settled, leaving the next move to Tajikistan.

2. Russian Pressure and Strategic Dictation

A second influential factor is the pressure and strategic guidance exerted by Russia. As a dominant power and security guarantor in Central Asia, Moscow's role is both structural and decisive. Russia has a clear interest in maintaining stability in Afghanistan through engagement with the Islamic Emirate in order to prevent the spillover of insecurity into Central Asia and, ultimately, toward its own borders. The pattern of Russian foreign policy suggests that Moscow is unwilling to allow Afghanistan to descend into chaos, as such instability would produce two major risks: first, the potential destabilization of Central Asia through Afghanistan; and second, the justification it would provide for external powers—particularly the United States—to reassert their presence in the region.

3. A Shift in the Security Equation

Another factor can be understood as a transformation from a unilateral to a bilateral security equation. For Tajikistan, security concerns emanating from Afghanistan were historically associated with Tajik militant groups aligned with the Taliban movement. However, the growing threat of the so-called Islamic State (Daesh) has emerged as a far greater and more immediate challenge to both Tajikistan and the Islamic Emirate. This shared perception of a common enemy has brought Dushanbe and Kabul into a converging security framework. Recognizing the seriousness of the ISIS threat, Tajikistan now seeks to address it through coordination and engagement with the Islamic Emirate rather than isolation.

4. The Decline of External Support for Anti-Emirate Fronts



Another key consideration is the diminishing attention paid by regional and global powers to anti-Emirate opposition fronts. Dushanbe has come to realize the ineffectiveness and marginalization of these groups within Afghanistan. In the absence of meaningful external backing for such factions, Tajikistan has concluded that continued support for them would be an unproductive and strategically costly endeavor.

5. Tajikistan's Economic Dependence on Afghanistan

Economic imperatives have also served as a major driver of Tajikistan's policy recalibration. The rapid expansion of Afghanistan's economic interactions with other neighboring states has left Tajikistan increasingly isolated and economically marginalized within the Afghan market. Moreover, as a *"doubly landlocked"* country, Tajikistan views Afghanistan as its most viable corridor for connecting with South and West Asia. Other regional states have already prioritized connectivity through Afghanistan, and any delay by Tajikistan in pursuing such routes could result in significant economic and strategic disadvantages.

6. Political and Geopolitical Considerations

Finally, both political and geopolitical realities have compelled Tajikistan to reassess its previous stance. Dushanbe's confrontational approach toward the Islamic Emirate has largely failed to yield tangible results. Its claims and security proposals regarding Afghanistan have been disregarded by both neighboring countries and major regional powers. From a geopolitical perspective, Tajikistan's continued withdrawal from the Afghan sphere has created a vacuum increasingly filled by other regional actors—particularly Uzbekistan, its primary rival in Central Asia. This gradual disengagement risks diminishing Tajikistan's influence and undermining its strategic relevance in the evolving regional order surrounding Afghanistan.

PROSPECTS FOR BILATERAL RELATIONS

Based on the preceding analysis, an important question arises: how far will Dushanbe's rapprochement with the Islamic Emirate ultimately go? Evidence suggests that Tajikistan's tangible and pragmatic interests—such as border security, economic cooperation, and the preservation of regional influence—are gradually taking precedence over more abstract principles, including human rights, women's rights, and the formation of an inclusive government. In this regard, Tajikistan appears to be following the same path that other neighboring countries have already pursued, albeit at a slower pace, toward developing practical relations with the Islamic Emirate.

In other words, Dushanbe is moving from an idealistic stance toward recognition of the existing political reality in Afghanistan, aligning its policy with regional trends that prioritize



engagement over isolation. Consequently, Tajikistan's political, security, and economic imperatives are compelling it toward constructive interaction, and the current trajectory indicates that Dushanbe will continue, alongside other regional actors, to gradually normalize and institutionalize its relations with the Islamic Emirate.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Tajikistan's pace in this process is likely to remain cautious and incremental. As the earlier analysis demonstrated, Dushanbe has already shifted from confrontation to engagement, but its approach remains deliberately slow and measured. Even so, this steady—if gradual—progress signifies an inevitable deepening of interaction. The prevailing political realities and economic necessities make positive engagement between Tajikistan and the Islamic Emirate not merely desirable but ultimately unavoidable.

CONCLUSION

An examination of Tajikistan's behavioral and rhetorical patterns indicates that the country's foreign policy toward the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has undergone a fundamental transformation—from a posture of confrontation and hostility to one of coexistence and engagement. However, considering Tajikistan's long-standing distrust and adversarial attitude toward the Islamic Emirate, this transformation has not been abrupt; rather, it has unfolded gradually, through a slow and step-by-step process.

Dushanbe's conduct reveals that Tajik policymakers have adopted a cautious and sequential approach, developing relations through a process of testing and observation. Beginning with the transfer of a consulate, followed by the reopening of border markets, and later through more substantial diplomatic initiatives, Tajikistan has expanded its engagement in a measured manner. This progression suggests that Dushanbe has been satisfied with the Islamic Emirate's responses and behavior.

Apart from a few minor border-level incidents, the Islamic Emirate has consistently demonstrated a policy of non-interference in Tajikistan's internal affairs and has sought to prevent any subversive activities by anti-Tajik groups operating from Afghan territory. Alongside this key factor, several others—political, security, and economic—have collectively motivated Dushanbe to move away from antagonism and toward a strategy of cooperation and constructive engagement, as discussed earlier.

Looking ahead, it appears that Tajikistan's tangible security and economic interests, combined with broader regional dynamics, have persuaded its leadership to pursue closer engagement with the Islamic Emirate. The current trajectory suggests that Dushanbe, albeit at a considerably slower pace than other neighboring countries, is advancing along the path of positive interaction. Therefore, it can reasonably be expected that bilateral relations will



gradually evolve toward higher levels of economic and security cooperation. Although this process may continue to face occasional fluctuations and delays due to the legacy of mistrust, the inevitability of constructive engagement—driven by political realities and economic imperatives—renders this course of action both necessary and unavoidable for Tajikistan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above assessment, several policy recommendations can be proposed:

1. The Islamic Emirate should take further concrete steps to build greater trust with Tajikistan.
2. Diplomatic channels between the two countries should be reopened and strengthened to facilitate sustained engagement.
3. Given the current conditions in Afghanistan, which present significant economic opportunities for Tajikistan, Dushanbe should accelerate its efforts toward positive interaction and the expansion of bilateral relations.
4. To institutionalize cooperation, both countries should establish joint political-security and economic committees aimed at developing long-term bilateral mechanisms.

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