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Tajikistan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests

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Summary

This report outlines the urgent developmental and social needs faced by Tajikistan since the settlement of its five-year civil war in 1997. It discusses U.S. policy and assistance. Basic facts and biographical information are provided. This report may be updated. Related products include CRS Issue Brief IB93108, *Central Asia's New States*, updated regularly.

U.S. Policy¹

The United States views Tajikistan as a “front-line state” in the Global War on Terror. It shares a long border with Afghanistan that is of “special importance” to regional stability, and U.S. assistance supports Tajikistan’s territorial integrity and security by helping it combat trafficking in drugs and weapons and the transit of terrorists. U.S. aid also focuses on democratic institution-building and economic reforms and dire humanitarian needs. (State Department, *Congressional Presentation for Foreign Operations*, FY2005).



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS. (08/02 M.Chin)

State Department officials served as observers at the U.N.-sponsored intra-Tajikistan peace talks and pledged rebuilding aid, an example of U.S. diplomatic efforts to head off

¹ Sources include Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: Central Eurasia*; *RFE/RL Newline*; *Eurasia Insight*; Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU); the State Department’s *Washington File*; and Reuters and Associated Press (AP) newswires.

or ease ethnic and civil tensions in the Eurasian states. The United States also supported the presence of U.N. military observers in Tajikistan during the 1992-1997 civil war. The United States has been the major humanitarian and developmental aid donor to facilitate implementation of the Tajik peace accord and for resettlement of displaced persons. Over the period FY1992-FY2003, the United States was the largest bilateral donor, budgeting \$550.6 million of aid for Tajikistan (FREEDOM Support Act and agency budgets), mainly for food and other humanitarian needs (by comparison, European Union members donated \$176 million). The United States also facilitated the delivery of Department of Defense excess and privately donated commodities worth \$120.7 million in FY1992-FY2003. Estimated spending in FY2004 was \$32.5 million (FREEDOM Support Act and other "Function 150" foreign aid, excluding Defense and Energy Department funds), and the Administration has requested \$36.35 million for FY2005 (FREEDOM Support Act and other foreign aid).

Most of the requested increase in aid for FY2005 is planned for food aid (\$10 million), mainly grain to address poor harvests. Help in upgrading irrigation systems will continue. The Administration also plans to focus on strengthening law enforcement, including aid for the government's Drug Control Agency, training and equipment for border guards for counter-drug and counter-terrorism efforts, and advice on combating terrorist financing and money laundering. Besides food aid, humanitarian support will include clothing, medicines, and medical supplies. Healthcare programs will aim to increase access to general physicians and to combat tuberculosis and malaria. A new, more secure, U.S. Embassy building will be completed in 2004.

Basic Facts

Area and Population: Land area is 55,800 sq. mi., slightly smaller than Wisconsin. Population is 6.5 million (*Economist Intelligence Unit*, end of 2003 est.). The Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region has called for greater autonomy, which is opposed by the Tajik government.

Ethnicity: 64.9% of the population is Tajik, 25% Uzbek, and less than 3.5% Russian (*CIA World Factbook 2003*). Clan and regional identities include the Khojenti, Kulyabi, Garmi, and Pamiri groups. More than a million Tajiks reside in Uzbekistan and 7 million in Afghanistan.

Gross Domestic Product: \$1.6 billion; per capita GDP is about \$239 (EIU, 2003 est., current prices).

Political Leaders: *President:* Emomali Rakhmanov; *Prime Minister:* Oqil Oqilov; *Speaker of the National Assembly (upper legislative chamber):* Mohammad Sayed Ubaydulloyev; *Speaker of the Assembly of Representatives (lower legislative chamber):* Saydullo Khayrulloev; *Foreign Minister:* Talbak Nazarov; *Defense Minister:* Col. Gen. Sherali Khayrullayev.

Biography: Rakhmanov was born in 1952 and trained as an economist. In 1988, he became a state farm director in Kulyab region. He quickly rose to power, boosted by his links to the paramilitary leader and ex-convict Sangak Safarov. He became chair of the Kulyab regional government in late 1992, and weeks later was elected chair of the Supreme Soviet and proclaimed head of state. In 1994 and 1999, he won presidential races deemed unfair by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and others.

Contributions to the Campaign Against Terrorism

The Administration has stated that Tajikistan has "unreservedly" supported coalition actions in Afghanistan by granting overflight and basing rights (*Congressional Presentation for Foreign Operations*). Tajikistan, host to the largest Russian military presence in Central Asia, seemed after 9/11 to be willing to cooperate with the United States but hesitant to do so without permission from Moscow. However, since Tajikistan had long supported the Afghan Northern Alliance's combat against the Taliban, they were predisposed to welcome U.S.-led backing for the Northern Alliance. On September 25, 2001, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov stated that the United States could use

bases in Tajikistan to attack targets in Afghanistan “if the need arises,” and that same day, the Tajik Defense Ministry indicated that Tajikistan would agree to permit use of its airspace by U.S. forces. Some coalition forces began to transit through Tajik airspace and airfields. On November 3, Tajik President Emomali Rakhmanov and visiting Defense Secretary Rumsfeld announced the use of Tajik airspace by U.S. forces for humanitarian aid and search and rescue missions. U.S., French, and British personnel have used the Dushanbe airport to a limited degree for refueling (the French maintain a presence of about 100 personnel), but the poor condition of facilities has precluded wide scale use by the coalition. Sayed Nuri, head of the Tajik Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), has basically endorsed the U.S.-led coalition’s actions in Afghanistan, though he has joined other Tajik Islamic groups in calling for coalition forces to leave Tajikistan when operations are over.

On March 13, 2003, President Rakhmanov reportedly refused Russia’s request to denounce coalition actions in Iraq. Tajik analyst Suhrob Sharipov argued that Tajikistan had taken a neutral stance because it had benefitted from U.S. aid to rebuild the country and from U.S.-led actions against terrorism in Afghanistan that improved its security.

Foreign Policy and Defense

The top priorities of Tajik foreign policy, Rakhmanov stated in April 2004, are ensuring beneficial trade and investment to support economic growth, protecting territorial integrity, boosting security, and furthering Tajikistan’s prestige in the world. Tajikistan follows an “open door” policy of pursuing amicable relations with all countries, he stated. He hailed increased ties with European countries and the European Union, the United States, Japan, China, Iran, India, Turkey and Pakistan. Close ties with Russia and other former Soviet republics are a priority, Rakhmanov stated. He proclaimed that Russia was “one of our closest strategic partners,” but also welcomed the phased withdrawal of its border troops from Tajikistan as a sign of the country’s independence (see also below). Relations with other Central Asian states face challenges. In 2000, Uzbekistan responded to incursions by terrorists traversing Tajikistan from Afghanistan by tightening its borders with Tajikistan, including by introducing a visa regime and mining border areas, constraining regional travel and trade and leading to Tajik civilian casualties. Following the actions of the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan that disrupted the actions of the terrorist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Uzbekistan eased some cross-border trade and travel restrictions on Tajikistan, but tightened them again in late 2003 to combat unapproved small-scale trade. In his April 2004 speech, Rakhmanov appeared to criticize Uzbekistan for trying to impose “biased goals” on the region. He also stressed that Tajikistan’s security depended on the world’s success in stabilizing Afghanistan. Tajikistan presses for political and human rights for the approximately seven million Tajiks reside in Afghanistan (25% of Afghanistan’s population).

According to *The Military Balance 2003-2004*, the Tajik armed forces consist of 6,000 ground and air defense troops. The armed forces are underfunded and riven by regional clan loyalties that compromise their effectiveness. In 1999-2000, some 2,000 UTO fighters were incorporated into the Tajik armed forces. Many Tajik officers and technicians receive training at Russian military schools, and the Tajik military is reliant on a Russian officer corps. To formalize their military presence in Tajikistan after the settlement of the Tajik civil war, in April 1999, Russia and Tajikistan signed alliance and military basing accords. The Russian Border Troops (about 12,000) and the Tajik Interior

Ministry border guards (about 1,200) consist predominantly of ethnic Tajik conscripts under Russian command. Russia's 201st Motorized Rifle Division consists of about 7,800 Russian contract and Tajik troops. Russia has justified its efforts to formalize a basing agreement for its 201st motorized rifle division by citing the Islamic extremist threat to the CIS. Talks have dragged on for five years, however, as Tajikistan seeks to maximize the annual rent and protect its sovereignty. Since a ten-year accord on the status of Russian border guards expired in 2003, Tajikistan has called for Russia to phase them out. The first contingents reportedly left for Russia in late May 2004 and the rest will follow by July 2005. Some observers speculate that Russia may have decided that the reduced terrorist threat from Afghanistan allowed it to rely more on its regional basing presence. Some Russian media in May 2004 reported that Russia would boost its base presence in Tajikistan. Also, Russia may have wanted to remove border troops who, ironically, might be contributing to drug trafficking into Russia. According to U.S. Ambassador Richard Hoagland in May 2004, the United States plans to boost support to the DCA and Tajik border troops as Russia reduces its border forces.

Tajikistan is a signatory of the Collective Security Treaty (CST) of the CIS (led by Russia). CST members in 2001 approved the creation of a regional Anti-Terrorist Center (composed of intelligence agencies) and regional rapid-deployment military forces that include a Tajik battalion, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 also approved the creation of an anti-terrorist center. Tajikistan decided to join NATO's Partnership for Peace before 9/11, and signed accords on admission in February 2002. At the signing, a NATO press release hailed Tajikistan's support to the coalition as "of key importance" to combating international terrorism.

The Tajik Civil War. Tajikistan was among the Central Asian republics least prepared and inclined toward independence when the Soviet Union broke up. In September 1992, a loose coalition of nationalist, Islamic, and democratic parties and groups tried to take over. Kulyabi and Khojenti regional elites, assisted by Uzbekistan and Russia, launched a successful counteroffensive that by the end of 1992 had resulted in 20,000-40,000 casualties and up to 800,000 refugees or displaced persons, about 80,000 of whom fled to Afghanistan. In 1993, the CIS authorized "peacekeeping" in Tajikistan, consisting of Russian and token Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek troops. After the two sides agreed to a cease-fire, the U.N. Security Council established a small U.N. Mission of Observers in Tajikistan (UNMOT) in December 1994. In June 1997, Tajik President Emomali Rakhmanov and rebel leader Sayed Abdullo Nuri signed a *comprehensive peace agreement*. Benchmarks of the peace process were largely met, and UNMOT pulled out in May 2000, replaced by a small U.N. aid contingent, but Russian troops have remained. Stability in Tajikistan is fragile. Observers remain concerned about secessionist tendencies in the northern Soghd (formerly Leninabad) region and tensions between ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks within Tajikistan.

Political and Economic Developments

Since the signing of the peace accords in 1997, Rakhmanov has steadily increased his authoritarian rule and marginalized the opposition. His ambit remains limited, however, by several local warlords. As set forth by the November 1994 constitution, the Oliy Majlis (legislature) enacts laws, interprets the constitution, determines basic directions of domestic and foreign policy, sets dates for referenda and elections, and approves key ministerial and other appointments. The legislature also approves the state budget,

determines tax policy, ratifies treaties, and approves a state of war or emergency as decreed by the president. The constitution calls for creation of a presidium to “organize work,” to be elected by the legislators and to be headed by the speaker. Laws are required to be passed by a two-thirds majority of the total number of deputies, and a presidential veto may be overridden by the same margin. The main Tajik opposition groups boycotted the November 1994 presidential election and constitutional referendum because they had no say in drawing up the draft constitution and would not be allowed to field their own candidates.

The Tajik legislature in mid-1999 rubber-stamped constitutional changes proposed by Rakhmanov calling for a seven year presidential term, a two-house Supreme Assembly (legislature), and the legalization of religious parties. A popular referendum approved the changes, and a presidential election was set for November 6, 1999. Tajik opposition candidates alleged that government harassment prevented them from registering, so that Rakhmanov emerged as the only approved candidate. This prompted opposition calls for an electoral boycott. To provide the gloss of a multi-candidate race, IRP nominee Davlat Usmon was added to the ballot, but he refused to run. Rakhmanov won with 96.9% of 2.85 million votes. The OSCE refused to monitor the election. Seeking to avert renewed war, Nuri agreed to respect the outcome of the election in return for pledges by Rakhmanov to allow fair legislative elections scheduled for 2000.

A legislative electoral law was approved with input from the UTO in late 1999 calling for an upper legislative chamber, the National Assembly (representing regional interests), to consist of 33 members, and a lower chamber, the Assembly of Representatives, to consist of 63 members. Elections to the lower chamber were set for February 27, 2000. In all, 191 candidates contested 41 single mandate seats and 107 candidates on six party lists competed for 22 seats. In the party list voting, the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) won fifteen seats, the Tajik Communist Party won five seats, and the IRP won two seats. Most winners of single mandate seats were PDP members. U.N. and OSCE observers who monitored the race concluded that voters were presented with a range of candidates of alternative parties, but the electoral process fell short of “minimum democratic standards.” They raised questions about freedom of the media, the independence of electoral commissions, apparently inflated turnout figures, and the transparency of vote tabulation. Upper legislative chamber seats were filled on March 23, 2000, by indirect voting by local council assemblies and the appointment of eight members by Rakhmanov. Most seats were filled by PDP members. Legislative elections are scheduled for February 2005.

Another referendum on changes to the constitution was held in June 2003. Opposition criticism included the possibility that one of the changes — that a president is limited to two seven-year terms — would permit Rakhmanov to claim two more terms in office under the “new” amendment. The Rakhmanov government has increased harassment of the IRP, with some observers arguing that permitting one religious party legally to operate emboldens other Islamic parties and groups, including extremists.

There are six registered parties. A coalition was formed by four opposition parties (the IRP, Social Democratic, Democratic, and Socialist) to work to ensure a free and fair legislative race in 2005. However, the International Crisis Group and other observers have suggested that the opposition parties remain weak and are often unwilling to challenge the ruling PDP. In May 2004, two alternative drafts of changes to the 1999

electoral law were introduced by PDP deputies and by IRP and Communist deputies of the Assembly of Representatives. U.S. and other international observers have urged changes to create independent election commissions and provisions for election monitoring to make the law more democratic.

According to the State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2003*, Tajikistan's government had a poor human rights record during the year and committed numerous serious abuses. Security forces at times arbitrarily arrested and detained persons and tortured, beat, and abused them, and also engaged in threats, extortion, and other abuses of civilians. Prison conditions were life threatening, but the government did begin to permit the International Red Cross to visit prisons. The judicial system was subject to political pressure. There were some political prisoners. Democratic Party head Mahmadrusi Iskandarov was under criminal investigation in 2003, but reportedly absolved in 2004. The government further restricted freedom of speech and media. There were some independent newspapers, but no independent national television networks. According to the State Department's *2003 International Religious Freedom Report*, the Rakhmanov government generally respects religious freedom, except that it and much of the population "fear" Islamic fundamentalism. The government has arrested dozens of members of the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir fundamentalist party. Nuri has raised concerns that the Rakhmanov regime has stepped up the persecution of devout Muslims. Criticism also have been raised regarding plans to tear down Tajikistan's only synagogue to make way for Rakhmanov's palace complex. In May 2004, Ambassador Hoagland stated that Tajikistan compared favorably to other Central Asian states in terms of "political pluralism," and that there was (despite some government harassment) "a positive trend in freedom of the mass media."

In late 1997, Tajikistan's economic decline reversed as the peace accord took hold. GDP grew about 10.2% and inflation was 16.3% in 2003, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit. Tajikistan has depended heavily on foreign loans and aid to cover its budget and trade deficits and external debt servicing. It had a large foreign debt (about \$1 billion) relative to its GDP. Repatriated funds from migrant workers in Russia and elsewhere may account for up to 20% of GDP. By 2000, most small enterprises had been privatized, and a 2003 plan calls for privatizing many major enterprises. Tajikistan's major export industry is the aluminum smelter in Tursunzade, one of the world's largest. Cotton and hydro-electricity are other major exports, and silk production and sheep herding are other significant sources of livelihood. Economic reforms face the challenges of the lowest educational level and the highest infant mortality and poverty rates of the former Soviet republics. According to U.N. estimates, at least 80% of the population lives in poverty. Tajikistan is a major transit state for heroin produced in Afghanistan and the drug trade has deeply corrupted the elite, indicated by a purge of the border guard force in 2002. Despite these challenges, Tajikistan has considerable development potential, according to the World Bank. Foreign private investment has been less than \$30 million per year, constrained by a poor legal climate, trade tariffs, and corruption.