Will Tajikistan ever enter the Eurasian Economic Union?

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is an international organization, member states of which include Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. As the name implies, the EAEU aims to integrate Eurasian economies in an economic union work together with all its potential trading partners. The Union's reach now extends far beyond Eurasia: it has already established a free trade area (FTA) with Vietnam, a temporary FTA with Iran, and FTA negotiations with India and Thailand are underway, while an agreement on trade and economic cooperation has been signed with China, and the EAEU has even began working to increase trade with Cuba.

There are other states however, which are not so far afield — they share common borders, long-standing ties and common interests with EAEU countries — yet they are still not member states. The Republic Of Tajikistan would be one example. Since the EAEU was established (the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union came into force on January 1, 2015), many experts have expected the Republic of Tajikistan would soon join the organization. However, Tajikistan has not taken any noticeable steps in this direction (at least not until the end of 2018), despite all possible benefits it could offer the country.

Different opinions are published by the media, which speculate about the reason why Tajikistan have still not joined the EAEU.

One theory is that for some reason or another, Tajikistan’s leadership believes that becoming a member of the EAEU will make it more complicated for Tajikistan to cooperate with the West. This seems like a strange explanation, given that the EAEU does not prohibit its members from cooperating with other states or organizations. Apart from this, Tajikistan’s main economic partners are not the West anyway, they are the countries in the Eurasian region.
One of the key areas that Tajikistan cooperates with these countries on is labor migration. Remittances sent home from citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan who work abroad account for a significant chunk of the country's total income. Most of these labor migrants from Tajikistan leave to find work in Russia and Kazakhstan. In 2018, the Republic of Tajikistan received about $2.5 billion worth of remittances from Russia alone (where about 1.2 million Tajiks are employed), which formed about 35% of the country's GDP. However, Kyrgyzstan has trumped Tajikistan on remittances, with citizens of Kyrgyzstan earning $2.63 billion in Russia in 2018. One of the reasons why Kyrgyzstan has outperformed Tajikistan is that it is in the EAEU. Since Kyrgyzstan is a member state, Kyrgyz citizens have the right to work in other EAEU countries without having to obtain a migrant work permit or several other documents, which is a time-consuming process. If Tajikistan were to join the EAEU, its citizens would also become eligible for the EAEU's simplified employment scheme, which could increase the income Tajikistan generates from labor migration.

The fact that Tajikistan is still not in the EAEU despite these attractive opportunities has sparked another theory, which is that some criminal groups with sway in Tajikistan's government are preventing the Republic of Tajikistan from joining the Eurasian Economic Union. These groups allegedly profit from vulnerable migrant workers and will lose their source of income if the red tape is cut on migration.

There is also another theory that Tajikistan is holding off from joining the EAEU to avoid opening up its market to an influx of imported goods: becoming part of the Eurasian Economic Union would require the reduction of customs duties, which would result in products produced by EAEU partners becoming significantly cheaper in the Tajik market. This could deprive local producers of demand and prevent the country from developing its own industry. As a non-member state however, Tajikistan's industry is losing out on large foreign investments and the access it would otherwise have to EAEU markets on favorable terms, while in the absence of competition from foreign goods, the quality of the products Tajikistan produces may begin to fall, and if that were to happen, there will still be demand for foreign goods in Tajikistan.

Finally, some observers believe that the Republic of Tajikistan will not join the EAEU as the country is looking to develop a partnership with China instead. This theory seems to be the most plausible. Since the Republic of Tajikistan established diplomatic relations with China in 1992, the Tajiks have been demonstrating their loyalty to China. Between 1999-2011, Tajikistan ceded several disputed areas of land on the Chinese-Tajik border to its Eastern neighbor. Tajikistan was also the first state to sign an agreement with China to participate in the Chinese One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR) for global transport and economic integration. As a result, the Republic of Tajikistan started receiving loans and investment from China, and began to develop bilateral trade and work together in other areas. Chinese enterprises began operating in the Republic of Tajikistan, and many joint projects were launched. Among other areas, a large percentage of gold extraction and processing in Tajikistan as well as that of silver and other minerals is controlled by China through joint ventures. In 2017, China has become the Tajikistan's top foreign investor. Tajikistan currently owes China $1.2 billion. It would be right to say that China is very important for the Republic of Tajikistan, and Tajikistan could be holding back from joining the EAEU for the sake of its relations with China.

In 2018 however, Russia was still Tajikistan's main trading partner, with Kazakhstan in second place. In recent years, Tajikistan has seen that members of the Eurasian Economic Union are granted distinct preferences by Russia. Those who back the idea of Tajikistan joining the Eurasian Economic Union argue that Tajikistan could receive a boost if goods to and from EAEU member states and other regions were to pass through Tajikistan, and that the EAEU could also provide the Republic of Tajikistan with economic security, protecting its underdeveloped economy from being swallowed up by the economies of other countries and regions.

Tajikistan already has a long-standing and very close partnership with all the EAEU states on security as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. This shows the high level of mutual trust that already exists between them. Another argument in favor of Tajikistan joining the EAEU is the historical and cultural ties it has with member states, which were formed as far back as the time of the Russian Empire.

In December 2018, the Republic of Tajikistan abolished customs duties on goods imported from EAEU countries and from other countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) which had signed the CIS Free Trade Area Agreement in October 2011. Many experts interpreted this as a serious step towards becoming a member of the EAEU, although as it has been pointed out here, the abolition of customs duties not only applied to imports from EAEU member states, but also from Moldova and Ukraine.

In spring 2019, the media began to re-explore the possibility of the Republic of Tajikistan joining the Eurasian
Economic Union after President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon paid a visit to Russia and met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in April 2019. This event was seen as a new step in developing relations between Russia and Tajikistan. The two leaders discussed regional security issues, mainly focusing on the work being carried out at Russia's 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, which the Russian President says ensures stability throughout the region. The President of Tajikistan was in full agreement with his Russian counterpart (shortly before his visit, Tajikistan had called on the Russian Federation to reinforce its 201st Military Base in light of the growing terrorist threat from neighboring Afghanistan).

Presidents Putin and Rahmon also brought up an important discussion on support for the provision of Russian-language courses in Republic of Tajikistan, and an agreement was signed to construct five Russian-language schools in Tajikistan, where teachers from Russia will work. However, economic partnership was the main topic. The Russian President spoke about the role that the Russian Federation plays in the Tajik economy, particularly given that almost all the petroleum products and oil Tajikistan consumes are supplied from Russia on preferential terms.

The two leaders signed important documents including an agreement on organized recruitment of labor migrants from the Republic of Tajikistan to work in Russia, as well as an agreement on Russian investments in Tajik industry and agriculture, and on the simplifying the import of Tajik agricultural products to the Russian Federation.

During the meeting, Vladimir Putin also said that the Russian Federation welcomes the Tajikistan's efforts to forge relationships with the EAEU across various different areas. It has been argued that the Russian leader would hardly voice such a direct invitation if he did not expect that it would be accepted. After all, modern Tajikistan still has more experience of working together with Russia than with China. Furthermore, while the Republic of Tajikistan wishes to develop its national economy, the country is also faced with a major security challenge. This is being felt very much so in connection with the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, including in its northern areas which border with Tajikistan. The Russian Federation has more experience than China when it comes to security issues. Therefore, it is fair to assume that whatever investments China may promise, Tajikistan's interests ensure that the country will prioritize working together with Russia, which will involve working through the EAEU.

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