



Tajikistan to lease 6,000 hectares of land to China

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Tajikistan to lease 6,000 hectares of land to China

By: Mark Vinson

A controversial plan approved by Tajikistan's Ministry of Agriculture to lease 6,000 hectares of land to China for development has been met with suspicion by some members of the country's political opposition. Chinese officials have pledged \$2 million of direct investment, including new technology and technical assistance in an effort to revitalize the land, which in recent years has become non-arable through poor management. According to the agreement, the Chinese will only be allowed to sell crops produced on that land in Tajik markets. So far, 50 hectares of land in Adbdulrahmon Jomi district and 415 hectares in Rumi district have already been handed over, and negotiations are underway regarding 200 additional hectares in Yovon district (Ozodagon, January 18).



Chinese construction work along the Dushanbe-Khojand-Chanak highway in Tajikistan (Source: theodorekaye.com)

In response to criticism from the opposition, Nazrullo Dodoboev, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Agriculture, defended the agreement and said, "They [the Chinese] will be restoring non-arable land. They need two years and four months to see a return on their investment and keep in mind that they will achieve that by selling their products in Tajikistan" (Ozodi, January 17). Tajikistan, a primarily mountainous country, is estimated to have only 6.25 percent arable land (8,844 square kilometers) with less than 1 percent devoted to full time crop production (www.cia.gov).

The need for development in Tajikistan's agricultural sector is widely acknowledged, especially given the aging Soviet irrigation systems. However, some are critical about this current leasing arrangement and are calling for a more transparent approach to partnering with international organizations already working in Tajikistan. Vahob Vahidov, the former Minister of Agriculture, notes the unsustainability of similar projects that the Chinese have implemented in Siberia, "It's not bad, but these same Chinese had all sorts of problems in Siberia...they cut down the Siberian trees and sent them to China. They only want to get the products, sell them, get rich, and stay here. It is necessary to stipulate conditions such as having Tajiks cooperate under the supervision of the Minister of Agriculture" (Tojnews, February 4).

So far, the agreement has exacerbated resentment over the creeping economic influence of the Chinese typified by last year's concession of 1,158 sq. km of disputed territory in Badakhshon province (Ozodi, October 4, 2011; for background see Jamestown China Brief, July 2011). The Rahmon administration presented the concession as a diplomatic coup and emphasized the fact that they only gave away 1 percent of the disputed territory, settling a row that had its roots in the era of Imperial Russia. However, critics lashed out by claiming that it was unconstitutional and compromised national sovereignty. Muhadin Kabbiri, the head the Islamic Revival Part of Tajikistan (Tajikistan's largest opposition group) criticized the decision, "Giving China more than 1,000 sq. km of our country's territory can never be considered a diplomatic victory. It is possible that other countries upon witnessing this development will also take part in territorial disputes with Tajikistan" (BBC Tajiki, January 12, 2011). Kabiri's reference to other countries most likely refers to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, both of which share territorial disputes with Tajikistan that have periodically led to violence.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, President Emomali Rahmon has strived to revive an independent Tajik identity, with a strong emphasis on autonomy and national sovereignty. Rahmon's emphasis on territorial integrity is one of the primary reasons that he has frustrated Russian efforts to allow the 201st Motorized Rifle Division to reassume responsibility for securing Tajikistan's southern border with Afghanistan (Ozodagon, September 15, 2011). Instead he has pursued a more multilateral approach of wooing a combination of US, Chinese and Iranian support to offset traditional Russian influence.

China, one of Tajikistan's largest trade partners, has invested over \$100 million directly in the

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Tajikistan mining sector (primarily through Zijin Mining Group and Xinjiang Tacheng International Resources Co. Ltd) and over \$200 million for the reconstruction of major roads used for trade between the two countries. Additionally, more than 50 Chinese companies are active in Tajikistan and Chinese investments have reached more than \$1 billion (Ozodi, January 4). Tajiks have increasingly expressed resentment towards the dominant role of the Chinese in their economy and perceived inequality in pay. One of the largest companies, "Zarafshon Gold" has been accused of treating Tajik workers unfairly. In September 2011, 1,500 workers protested against unequal pay compared to their Chinese counterparts and a 30 percent pay cut in July to August despite an increase in inflation and the cost of living. According to official statistics, 75 percent of the extracted gold goes to China and only 25 percent remains in Tajikistan (Ozodagon, September 12, 2011).

Tajikistan's high unemployment rate and reliance on remittances from migrant laborers in Russia, combined with the presence of large numbers of Chinese workers in Tajikistan, breeds resentment amongst some Tajiks. Faromarzi Fossil, a Tajik journalist, in an article entitled, "Tajiks go to Russia and Chinese come to Tajikistan?" expresses this sentiment, "It is clear that Chinese companies [in Tajikistan] give privileges to their fellow countrymen. What should the people of Tajikistan do? And another question: if the Chinese and other foreigners build all the roads, power plants, companies, and farms then why do we even need our own ministries?" (Tojnews, February 4).

Tajikistan's multi-vector approach to partnering with its allies represents a desire to balance the traditionally dominant role that Russia has played in its affairs. Thus far, China has not attempted to gain a military foothold in the country in the same way Russia, the US, France and India have. Their emphasis on commercial ties and investment in infrastructure follows the same approach taken in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and is aimed both at creating markets for Chinese products and easing access to Central Asian energy resources. Despite its increasing economic influence, compared to Russia, Iran and the West, China suffers from a deficit of soft power in Tajikistan. In recent years China has stepped up its public diplomacy efforts by launching several Chinese language learning initiatives. However, its lack of traditional ties to the region, dearth of cultural capital, and opportunistic trade policies mean that even potentially mutually beneficial partnerships are increasingly interpreted negatively by a wide segment of the population. This lack of popular support may eventually pressure Rahmon to recalibrate Tajikistan's move toward China by attracting new partners or returning to Russia's sphere of influence.

Source: [Jamestown Foundation](#)

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