



# Rivals for Authority in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan

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**What's new?** The Tajik government's control of its eastern territory, Gorno-Badakhshan, is tenuous at best. Irregulars loyal to local powerbrokers known as the Authorities have clashed with government forces in the past and may do so again if challenged. China has a growing security presence in the region.

**Why does it matter?** Gorno-Badakhshan sits at the nexus of security problems including Uighur unrest in China's Xinjiang region; Afghanistan's war and opium trafficking; and jihadists' potential return from Iraq and Syria to China, Central Asia or Russia. A rocky transition when President Emomali Rahmon steps down could provoke further instability in the region.

**What can be done?** Rahmon's government resists outside advice, but Moscow and Beijing, which have some influence and fear upheaval in Tajikistan, could perhaps nudge the president toward a transition that minimises risks of violence. China also should communicate more clearly its concerns and interests in the region, to both Russia and local inhabitants.

## I. Overview

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Gorno-Badakhshan is one of the most strategically sensitive areas in Central Asia. Situated high in the Pamir mountains, this autonomous region (or oblast) of eastern Tajikistan is bordered to the south and west by Afghanistan and to the east by China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Beijing's security presence in the region appears to be increasing, likely motivated by concerns about Uighur militants operating across the border in Afghanistan or returning from the Middle East. Since the 1990s, Gorno-Badakhshan has sought to strengthen its self-rule, including through armed struggle. For now, it is relatively quiet, but that could change without warning. At some point soon, perhaps as early as 2020, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon is expected to hand over power to a younger family member. A rocky transition could lead Gorno-Badakhshan powerbrokers to seek a more influential role in the new dispensation. Their track record suggests they may be willing to use force to achieve their ends.

In advance of the planned power transfer, President Rahmon is tightening social and political controls, and suppressing criticism from civil society, across the country. But results in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) have been mixed

as Dushanbe tiptoes around the key threat to internal security: well-armed local powerbrokers (known as the Authorities) who sit astride politics, law enforcement and organised crime, and whose personal clout in GBAO often surpasses the government's. Indeed, many residents view them as philanthropists, providers of basic services, and protectors of local interests and values.

Government representatives – whether high-ranking officials from Rahmon's home province of Kulob in southern Tajikistan or locals working for the GBAO regional administration – treat these informal powerbrokers with caution. The Authorities' irregular forces have inflicted bloody losses on government troops in recent years, underscoring the limits to Dushanbe's power in the oblast. Today, GBAO residents say these forces are better armed and organised than ever before; many assume another confrontation with Tajik security forces is a question not of whether but of when, given the tenuous nature of the accommodation between the Authorities and the regime.

The Afghan-GBAO border is a source of concern for China, Russia, the United States and other foreign powers. Tajikistan is a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation and home to Russia's largest base abroad. It is an important transit point for Chinese goods destined for Afghanistan, Pakistan and further afield. The Taliban and fighters affiliated with the Islamic State-Khorasan Province operate along the Afghan side of the frontier, though they have yet to show any interest in crossing it (and in the case of the Taliban, a movement focused only on Afghanistan, are unlikely to do so in the future). Afghan opiates, on the other hand, flow freely into Tajikistan and onward to Russia, China and the West.

Beijing appears to have established a security presence in GBAO. Local officials and residents say China has built an installation in a remote corner of the oblast, near both Xinjiang and the Afghan border. The location is not surprising, given China's concern about Uighurs fighting in Iraq and Syria, some of whom could return through Afghanistan or Central Asia. Yet Beijing's presence has provoked some local concern, and increasing Chinese influence in the region could needle Russia, which traditionally has stronger ties to Tajikistan.

Any measures the government takes to curtail the Authorities' influence in Gorno-Badakhshan could well make things worse; previous attempts to crack down have provoked violence. But an orderly post-Rahmon transition would at least mitigate the danger of a more serious escalation. While Western powers' ability to shape such a transition is limited, Moscow and Beijing, which have more clout in Dushanbe and share an interest in Tajikistan's stability, could perhaps push in that direction. China also could take steps to diminish potential friction caused by misunderstanding about its role, particularly through further information sharing with Moscow. It should take seriously fears among the local population about its role in Gorno-Badakhshan, communicate clearly its interests and strategy in the region, and engage the local labour force, rather than imported Chinese workers, in its economic endeavours.

## II. Mountainous Badakhshan

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GBAO is the poorest part of the poorest former Soviet republic in Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> It makes up about half of Tajikistan's territory and three per cent of its population. Much of eastern GBAO is empty, 3,000-4,000 metres above sea level, with roads largely unrepaired since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The 300km journey from the largest eastern settlement, Murghab, to the region's main city, Khorog, in western Badakhshan, takes at least eight hours. The region was first described as an autonomous oblast in the 1924 Tajikistan constitution. That designation bestows no legal or practical privileges.

The majority of GBAO's 200,000 inhabitants are Pamiris whose culture, language and religion are distinct from those of the Tajik majority. Pamiri languages belong to a branch of the Iranian language group different from the Tajik spoken across most of Tajikistan. While most Tajiks are Hanafi Sunnis, Pamiris are Ismaili Shiites who recognise the Aga Khan as their spiritual leader. Straddling Tajikistan and Afghanistan, Badakhshan is rich in gemstones, as well as rare and precious metals. The government touts the economic potential of mining and tourism but has done nothing to develop these sectors. Residents can be seen panning for gold outside Murghab. With the economy barely functioning, the Aga Khan Development Network fills significant social welfare gaps, including in education, housing and health.

The government makes little effort, in GBAO or elsewhere, to address the politically explosive issue of youth unemployment. For the youth of GBAO, and for their peers across Tajikistan, post-schooling options are limited: emigrate, mostly to Russia, or eke out a grim existence on the economic fringes. Some join the Authorities' irregulars in clashes with Tajik government forces. A few become smugglers. GBAO has produced a disproportionately large segment of Tajikistan's educated elite, many of whom work in universities, foreign missions and the private sector. This group is tiny, however, and mostly excluded from political power, which is the preserve of Rahmon's relatives or others from Kulob.<sup>2</sup> Central government representatives in

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<sup>1</sup> Research was conducted in late 2017 during a road trip from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan across GBAO to Dushanbe. The prevailing repression made communication with longstanding contacts unusually difficult. Most officials in Khorog, the regional capital, and other places were hard to reach, and none was willing to be quoted on the record. Only one was willing to be identified as an official, as long as his geographical location was not disclosed. Officials of the central government did not respond to several calls made over the course of six weeks, a frequent occurrence in Tajikistan. Crisis Group was, however, able to contact well-informed Badakhshanis, including academics and political activists, living in Europe. Several of these had close contacts with both the local traditional elite and the Authorities – the ruling circles in Badakhshan are often closely related by kinship and work experience. In Khorog and elsewhere, Crisis Group had talks with academics and local civil servants, one of whom made it clear he worked for an Authority. The research was also informed by extensive interviews with foreign officials – Western, regional, Russian and multilateral – in Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries.

<sup>2</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°86, *The Rising Risks of Misrule in Tajikistan*, 9 October 2017; Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°78, *Tajikistan Early Warning: Internal Pressures, External Threats*, 11 January 2016; Crisis Group Asia Report N°244, *China's Central Asia Problem*, 27 February 2013; Crisis Group Asia Report N°205, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, 24 May 2011. Tajikistan is one of the most corrupt former

GBAO are preoccupied with Rahmon's top priority: maintaining an appearance of serenity in keeping with the president's self-styled persona as "founder of peace and national unity" and "leader of the nation". Gorno-Badakhshan, however, has a habit of knocking holes in this façade.

### III. Crackdown

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Asked about government priorities in GBAO, a regional official answered with unusual candour, "we're tightening the screws". The instructions came from Dushanbe, he said, and were "connected with recent events in the capital", referring to what most consider the first signs of a gradual handover of presidential power.<sup>3</sup>

For twenty years, Rahmon has worked to clear Tajikistan of political rivals.<sup>4</sup> In 1997, after prevailing in the five-year civil war, the president commenced removing not only opposition leaders but also senior figures from his own side whom he thought disloyal.<sup>5</sup> In 2015, the government banned the country's best organised opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). Nearly all IRPT leaders are now jailed or have sought exile in Europe. Some members of the opposition reportedly have been assassinated or forcibly returned to Tajikistan for trial.<sup>6</sup> Defence and human rights lawyers have also come under pressure,<sup>7</sup> as have their families.<sup>8</sup>

Rahmon's aim at present appears to be to eliminate any opponent who might impede the transfer of power. Officials routinely contrast the current situation with the civil war, warning that any opposition to the state could start another round of deadly violence.<sup>9</sup>

In GBAO, one recent exile says, the government is pressuring "inconvenient intellectuals and critics who might damage the leadership's reputation or cast doubt on the president's achievements".<sup>10</sup> This person, a prominent Gorno-Badakhshan politician, sought asylum in Europe in early 2017 after being warned of impending criminal charges. In Khorog, a once lively intellectual scene has evaporated. Many academics, journalists, opposition politicians and civil society activists are intimidated. A number of former Crisis Group interlocutors have left the country, or are planning to leave,

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Soviet republics in Central Asia, ranking just above Turkmenistan and below Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index.

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group interview, regional official, GBAO, September 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°86, *The Rising Risks of Misrule in Tajikistan*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°78, *Tajikistan Early Warning: Internal Pressures, External Threats*, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> See Crisis Group Asia Report N°162, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, 12 February 2009, pp. 2-4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. See also "Tajikistan: Free human rights lawyers", Human Rights Watch, 4 May 2016; and "Tajikistani dissenters at grave risk after an opposition lawyer shot dead in Turkey", Amnesty International, 6 May 2015.

<sup>7</sup> "Tajikistan: Free human rights lawyers", Human Rights Watch, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> "Tajikistan: Abuse of dissidents' families", Human Rights Watch, 20 December 2016.

<sup>9</sup> There is no reliable estimate for the civil war's death toll. Figures range from 20,000 to more than 100,000. The highest estimate of the number of internally displaced is 1.2 million. Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°86, *The Rising Risks of Misrule in Tajikistan*, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group phone interview, political exile from GBAO, November 2017.

usually citing the repressive environment as the main reason. Others are aware of the dangers of being accused of disloyalty by the regime.<sup>11</sup>

#### **IV. Breaking the Silence**

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GBAO has rarely stuck to the government's script. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Gorno-Badakhshan politicians won an increase in their representation in the country's leadership. During the 1992-1997 civil war, the region was a stronghold of Rahmon's main adversaries, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), a broad coalition of opposition forces.

After the war, Rahmon built a narrow power base of relatives and residents of his native region of Kulob. Most other regions are still politically cowed and economically neglected. In contrast, Gorno-Badakhshan has seen large-scale protests, mostly organised by the Authorities and their supporters, at several junctures in the last decade.

In 2008, a mass demonstration occurred in Khorog. It was a rare event for Tajikistan, where protests are usually swiftly dispersed. Officially, demonstrators were protesting Dushanbe's cession of GBAO territory to China. But at least one of the Authorities was among the speakers who addressed the crowd; participants and some organisers said the demonstration had been sparked in part by reports that security forces had been flown into the city, allegedly to launch operations against the Authorities.<sup>12</sup> In 2012, clashes in Khorog between Tajik military and security forces, on one side, and well-armed locals, on the other, killed at least 50. In 2014, residents angered by a clumsy police operation in central Khorog burned state security headquarters and other government buildings.<sup>13</sup> The ensuing unrest claimed numerous lives – again, how many is difficult to say, given the government's secrecy and the opposition's tendency to exaggerate.

All clashes appear to have been sparked, in one way or another, by the central government's efforts to break the Authorities' power. No attempt was successful; most ended in uneasy truces that embarrassed Dushanbe and enhanced the Authorities' standing. Indeed, after the 2012 confrontations with Tajik government forces, leaders of the Authorities were involved in negotiations aimed at calming tensions,

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<sup>11</sup> For people who talk to foreign researchers, one long-time acquaintance said, "there is a real risk of a prison sentence". A number of academics, journalists, opposition politicians and civil society figures warned Crisis Group in advance that they could not talk, while others did not pick up the phone when called. Conversations that took place did so in fragments, in the street or cafés, often over several days. Crisis Group interviews, October 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°162, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, op. cit. The government promised to withdraw the newly arrived units.

<sup>13</sup> The operation was triggered by the murder of a senior counter-narcotics official on the orders of an Authority, who may have been out to grab the official's share of drug money. It quickly turned into an effort by state security forces to wipe out the armed opposition. The raid ended in failure, much like its disastrous counterpart in the neighbouring region of Rasht in 2010. As in Rasht, the operation resulted in the death of local opposition leaders who were not on the target list. In Khorog the local IRPT leader was killed; in Rasht, a former senior UTO commander and government minister died under mysterious circumstances. Crisis Group Asia Report N°205, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, op cit.

which strengthened their position.<sup>14</sup> Since the violence, some reports have suggested that security forces have at times shown reluctance to become involved in Badakhshan. In 2016, officials were forced to deny reports that an elite unit had refused posting to Khorog and that some soldiers had deserted.<sup>15</sup> Many observers claim that the Authorities' irregulars control the city streets after dark. This contention is almost certainly an exaggeration, though another well-connected local added that police "are very careful when they enter certain districts of Khorog at night".<sup>16</sup>

## V. Authorities

The paymasters and commanders of GBAO's irregulars are men widely known as the Authorities (Авторитеты). These men participated in the civil war on the side of the UTO and, pursuant to the 1997 peace agreement, received senior posts in the police, border guards and security services. They style themselves as defenders of Pamiri traditions and culture and, given the suppression of political opposition, are virtually the only actors who can claim to be protecting Gorno-Badakhshan's separate regional identity.

The distribution of jobs to UTO commanders after the civil war was widely viewed as a way to placate them until they could be neutralised or co-opted. In GBAO, however, the Authorities have proven resilient, bringing many of their old fighters into quasi-official positions. They thus operate as shadow authorities, sitting atop networks that are partly integrated into local institutions.<sup>17</sup> They pay little heed to Dushanbe despite receiving government salaries. "They ignore us", said a government official.<sup>18</sup>

Most GBAO observers speak of three or four key Authorities. Each has his own social base, usually a district in the region's largest town, Khorog, as well as a political and paramilitary apparatus.<sup>19</sup> When all is quiet, the bosses compete for cross-border business. When the central government flexes its muscle, "they come together again".<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> A group of twenty civil society activists, local politicians and religious leaders mediated between the Authorities and government forces. "Мониторинг Соблюдения Прав Человека в Связи с Проведением Специальной Операции 24 Июля 2012 года в городе Хорог, ГБАО" ["Monitoring the observance of human rights in connection with the special operation on 24 July 2012 in the city of Khorog, GBAO"], Civic Solidarity, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> "ГКНБ Таджикистана опровергает слухи о бегстве бойцов «Альфы»" ["Tajikistan SCNS denies rumours of the flight of 'Alpha' troopers"], Asia Plus, 26 January 2016. See also "Tajikistan: Mysterious security measures provoke jitters", EurasiaNet, 26 January 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group, phone interview, Khorog resident, December 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Rasht, a former UTO base adjacent to Gorno-Badakhshan, has also fought back against the central government. The Rasht versions of the Authorities, who at least in name are police or border guard commanders, allegedly staged fighting in 2009-2010 in which several dozen government troops were killed. The Rasht commanders are less popular than their GBAO counterparts. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°162, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°205, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview, local official, Khorog, October 2017.

<sup>19</sup> The GBAO Authorities are probably organised along the same lines as in Rasht. There, in a conversation with Crisis Group, the main Authority claimed to have a heavily armed six-man security team composed of former UTO lieutenants, each of whom could mobilise 50-60 more fighters. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°205, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, well-connected GBAO politician, October 2017.

If clashes erupt, the Authorities can muster dozens of unemployed youth from Khorog and its environs, in addition to their regular gunmen. They also mediate local disputes and help the needy, supplanting Dushanbe's appointees, who are viewed as corrupt and dismissive of Pamiri traditions.

The informal provision of services by GBAO's Authorities is described by residents and political analysts of the region as largely self-serving, aimed at maintaining a criminal enterprise, particularly in narcotics.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the Authorities often fill in the gaps left by an underpaid, underfunded and under-skilled local administration. This fact, combined with the distrust with which residents view Dushanbe and its appointees, is one important reason why the Authorities enjoy considerable, albeit ambivalent, public legitimacy.

Many inhabitants see the Authorities as guarantors of Gorno-Badakhshan's autonomy. As one local said: "We are aware they are violent criminals, and we do not like this. But when they protect our region from Dushanbe, they are at that moment performing a service to our people".<sup>22</sup> Others admit to grudging admiration for what they see as beating the government at its own game. Should the Rahmon succession plan falter, the Authorities would be poised to carve out greater autonomy for themselves and the region.

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## VI. China's Rising Profile

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China's security presence in the region appears to be increasing.<sup>23</sup> This is a new development, presumably motivated by Chinese security concerns about the return of Uighur fighters from Iraq and Syria or potential spillover from Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> The prospect of returning fighters worries Tajikistan, too: any jihadist attack could blow a hole in President Rahmon's carefully crafted narrative of calm.<sup>25</sup>

Officials in GBAO and Dushanbe confirmed Beijing's security presence in the oblast. "There are quite a lot of Chinese soldiers here", one said, adding that they keep

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<sup>21</sup> It is a widely held view that the Authorities are adroitly using their stance as protectors of GBAO traditions to reinforce their position vis-à-vis the central government. This essentially self-serving approach was noted frequently during research for this report, and in multiple past discussions on the role of the Authorities.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interview, GBAO academic, September 2017.

<sup>23</sup> During Crisis Group's research, the clearest indication of the Chinese presence came in Murghab (pop. 4,000), an ethnic Kyrgyz settlement an eight-hour drive from the Kyrgyzstan border and eight hours east of Khorog. A group of Chinese military officers entered the only restaurant to buy beer and vodka, accompanied by a Kyrgyz-language military translator, a non-Han junior officer. Local residents confirmed the Chinese were not just passing through. When the officers ran low on Tajik currency, the saleswoman offered to take renminbi. Crisis Group observations and exchanges with GBAO residents, October 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Gerry Shih, "AP exclusive: Anger with China drives Uighurs to Syrian war", Associated Press, 22 December 2017. On 8 February 2018, U.S. Central Command said airstrikes in Afghanistan targeted East Turkestan Islamic Movement training camps near the border with Tajikistan and China. "U.S. airstrikes target terrorist networks in northern Afghanistan", news release, U.S. Central Command, 8 February 2018. For more on China's concerns in Central Asia, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°244, *China's Central Asia Problem*, 27 February 2013. The report details the political, economic and security aspects of China's growing involvement in the region.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Dushanbe-based diplomats, October 2017.

a low profile.<sup>26</sup> Another spoke of some form of Chinese security installation in the settlement of Shaimak, near the border with Xinjiang and the Wakhan corridor, a high mountain valley in Afghanistan separating Tajikistan and Pakistan. He described the installation as “a joint counter-terrorism centre” housing Tajik forces as well. Neither the Tajik government nor the Chinese Embassy in Dushanbe responded to further inquiries. (The Chinese defence ministry did not provide answers to Crisis Group queries before our publication date.) A Western diplomat in another Central Asian republic confirmed that his own embassy was aware of the increased Chinese security presence in GBAO, including the installation.<sup>27</sup>

Russian sources indicate that the growing Chinese presence in Central Asia is a source of sensitivity for Moscow.<sup>28</sup> Tajikistan, a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation, is home to the 201st Motor Rifle Base, Russia's largest base on foreign soil.<sup>29</sup> Only a few years ago, Russian analysts and officials were wont to describe Central Asia as Moscow's “backyard”, making it clear that Beijing should closely coordinate any activity in Central Asia with Russian counterparts. A Russian expert with extensive experience in Tajikistan expressed indignation that Chinese officials would not have informed their opposite numbers in Moscow of plans for an installation in GBAO. The Chinese, he noted, are Russia's “strategic allies [in Central Asia but] they do not always tell us what they are doing. They are very self-confident”.<sup>30</sup>

China already has an advantage over Russia in the region, namely, the money and, perhaps, willingness to fund the massive infrastructure and other projects that Tajikistan desperately needs. In 2016, China set up a “quadrilateral cooperation and coordination mechanism” with Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan for sharing information and counter-terrorism training.<sup>31</sup> The Tajik government subsequently approved plans allowing China to finance and build eleven border outposts and a training centre.<sup>32</sup>

Russian influence remains strong, especially with regard to security cooperation. Russian-Tajik relations are bolstered by well-established business and personal connections between the two countries' elites. But the balance could shift should China's

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<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview, GBAO, September 2017. On 1 October 2015, Tajikistan and China signed an agreement on construction of posts along the Tajik-Afghan frontier, and in 2016 China and Tajikistan held their first joint military exercises in Tajikistan bordering Badakhshan. See “China reportedly building military base for Afghan armed forces at Afghanistan's border with Tajikistan”, *Asia Plus*, 8 January 2018; Joshua Kucera, “China holds anti-terror exercises on Afghanistan-Tajikistan border”, *EurasiaNet*, 24 October 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, January 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Bishkek, February 2016.

<sup>29</sup> It is officially known as “201-я Гатчинская ордена Жукова дважды Краснознаменная военная база” [“201st Gatchina Order of Zhukov Twice Red Banner Military Base”], according to the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. The U.S. has also invested in aid and training of Tajik special forces.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, October 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Martina and Robert Birsell, “China joins Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan in security alliance”, *Reuters*, 4 August 2016. See also “Tajikistan, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan will create a system of quadrilateral cooperation”, *Asia Plus*, 28 August 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Nazarali Pirnazarov, Olzhas Auyezov and Jeremy Gaunt, “China to build outposts for Tajik guards on Tajikistan-Afghanistan border”, *Reuters*, 26 September 2016.



security presence continue to grow.<sup>33</sup> Regardless of how such dynamics evolve, improved coordination among the Tajik, Russian and Chinese governments and, where appropriate, security officials could address areas of mutual concern, such as reinforcing the Tajik-Afghan border.

China's presence in GBAO also has raised some local concern. The predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz population of eastern GBAO is wary of Beijing's intentions. The central government's sale of land to China, ratified by parliament in 2011 but done without local consultation, sowed sharp resentment because it cut off access to ancestral graves.<sup>34</sup> "My heart still weeps", as one interlocutor put it.<sup>35</sup> Other ethnic Kyrgyz Tajik citizens expressed suspicions that China would cooperate with the ruling elite to expropriate the region's mineral resources and would use Chinese, not local, labour to do so.<sup>36</sup> These fears echo criticism of Chinese behaviour in other parts of Central Asia.<sup>37</sup>

Government critics, both in Khorog and in exile, also worry that Beijing's cooperation with Dushanbe will reinforce the Tajik government's repression of its rivals. Some Crisis Group interlocutors accused China of supplying surveillance technology to state security forces in GBAO and elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> Regardless of whether such claims are true, Beijing would benefit from taking into account fears that China is starting to assist the government's security organs. Even as Beijing deepens ties to Dushanbe, it could consider communicating to Russia and others more clearly its strategy toward Central Asia, particularly toward sensitive regions like GBAO. Where it is economically involved, it should do everything possible to draw on the local labour force, rather than importing Chinese workers.

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## VII. Conclusion

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GBAO is in many ways a microcosm of Tajikistan. The regime's policies in the region reflect its leadership's determination to hold on to power and apparent unwillingness to rein in systemic corruption, even when the venality weakens its own military and security structures. Whenever possible, it will opt for the appearance of reform rather than real action, while institutions continue to erode. Should Rahmon stumble when handing over the presidency, politicians from excluded regions could make

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<sup>33</sup> Afghan government officials said in January 2017 that China will assist in developing a military base in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province. But the extent of Chinese involvement is unclear, with Beijing denying both Afghan announcements of cooperation and previous media reports of Chinese patrols in Afghanistan. "China denies it's planning a military base in Afghanistan", *South China Morning Post*, 25 January 2018.

<sup>34</sup> "Tajikistan cedes land to China", BBC, 13 January 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, Murghab, September 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Osh, Kyrgyzstan and Murghab, September 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group has previously noted the generally poor image of Chinese companies working in the region, and warned that "Chinese economic expansionism – if it fails to deliver benefits to the working population and enriches only certain political families – could become a liability". Crisis Group Asia Report N°244, *China's Central Asia Problem*, op. cit.

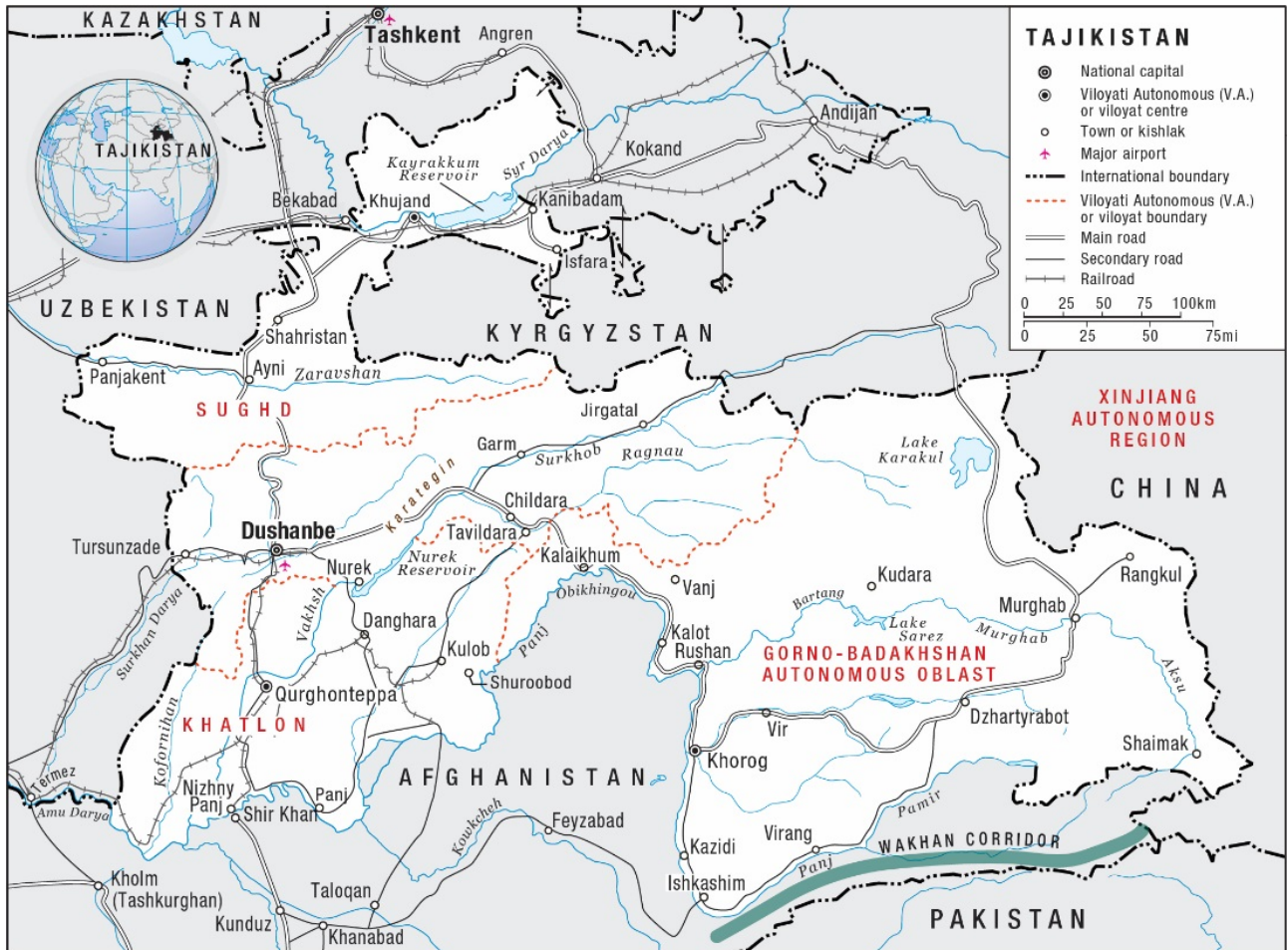
<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group phone interview, Russia-based expert, November 2017. Crisis Group phone interview, political exile from GBAO, November 2017.

a violent play for a greater share of central power, or at least more local autonomy. If this transpires in GBAO, the regime's security forces will be stretched thin.

For now, little suggests that the government could curb the influence of the Authorities in Gorno-Badakhshan without risking another bout of violence. But at least it should avoid a disorderly transition – if indeed Rahmon seeks to hand over power in the years ahead – that could provoke further instability in the region. Given Beijing's and Moscow's leverage in Dushanbe, and that both share an interest in averting turmoil in Tajikistan, both should use their influence behind the scenes to nudge President Rahmon toward a transfer of power that as best as possible minimises prospects of violence. They also should seek better information sharing to avoid potential misunderstandings, particularly in light of China's growing security presence.

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Appendix A: Map of Tajikistan



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations or International Crisis Group. International Crisis Group/KO/February 2018. Based on UN map no. 3765, Rev. 11 (October 2009).



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