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“Rogun Is A Source Of Endless Light” cheers a roadside sign flanking an image of President Emomali Rahmon. “Rogun Is the Source of National Pride for All Children of Tajikistan,” says the other.

TAJIKISTAN'S DREAM

Poor, landlocked, and bedeviled by its neighbors, Tajikistan is staking its future on the one resource it has in abundance.

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THE SMALL TOWN OF ROGUN RESEMBLES many other remote settlements in the former Soviet Union. Giant factories gone to rust and empty concrete apartment blocks, once brightly painted, now crumbling, achieve a sort of grandeur set against spectacular natural surroundings—the snowcapped peaks of the Alay Mountains and, about 1,500 feet down a steep bluff next to town, the rushing Vakhsh River. Yet, as a reminder of the past, and perhaps a portent of things to come, the occasional cement truck still chugs down the steep road

into town and roadside signs still exhort the citizenry, though they no longer quote Lenin or Marx: “Rogun Is the Source of National Pride for All Children of Tajikistan.” “The Establishment of the Rogun Hydroelectric Plant Is the Bright Future for Tajikistan.” “Water Is the Source of Life.”

There is a special sense in which that last slogan is truer for Tajikistan than for most other countries. Geography—and the Stalin-era officials who drew the borders of this erstwhile Soviet republic—dealt Tajikistan an unlucky hand.



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The main street in Rogun, a modest town that hopes to be home to the world’s tallest dam, a relatively narrow clay and stone “embankment” dam more than 1,000 feet high.

Ninety-three percent of its surface is mountainous, which means there is very little arable land. As part of the demarcation process in the 1920s, Moscow denied Tajikistan the once glorious Silk Road cities of Bukhara and Samarqand that Tajiks consider the jewels of their culture, instead putting them in Uzbekistan. The country is profoundly isolated, with borders either remote and inaccessible or shared with difficult neighbors. One indication of the vexed state of Tajikistan's surroundings is the fact that, during the civil war of the 1990s, Tajikistani refugees fled *to* Afghanistan.

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What Tajikistan does have in abundance is water. Its mountains hold some of the world's largest glaciers, and the hydropower potential of the country, about the size of Iowa, ranks among the largest in the world. So President Emomali Rahmon has staked the future of his country on building the world's tallest dam, here in Rogun. Electricity from the hydropower plant would end

the country's chronic power shortages, while the surplus would create a lucrative export to power-hungry Pakistan, India, and China. President Rahmon has repeatedly said that the dam is of "life or death importance" to Tajikistan.

But Tajikistan is not the only country with an interest in that precious liquid. Downstream, water from Tajikistan's mountains flows into Uzbekistan's vast cotton fields, and the Vakhsh is a significant tributary of the important Amu Darya River. Uzbekistan's president, Islam Karimov, fears that the dam could interfere with that lucrative cash crop, Uzbekistan's top export, and has threatened war to prevent it from being built.

The conflict between the two nations is linked to a global increase in tensions over fresh water. In the Middle East, for example, Turkey's ambitious hydroelectric and irrigation plans have stirred fears among downstream countries in the Tigris-Euphrates basin, and in Egypt there is talk of war over an Ethiopian dam that is rising on a major tributary of the Nile. A retired Egyptian general told *The Washington Post* that his counterparts on active duty may decide that "it is better to die in battle than to die in thirst." A 2012 U.S. intelligence report minimized the possibility of "a water-related state-on-state conflict" anywhere in the world



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for the following decade, but warned that “as water shortages become more acute beyond the next 10 years, water in shared basins will increasingly be used as leverage; the use of water as a weapon or to further terrorist objectives also will become more likely beyond 10 years.”

THAT FUTURE COULD COME SOONER in Central Asia. Two decades after the demise of the Soviet Union, the region’s five now-independent states have become increasingly isolated from, if not hostile to, one another. Borders have hardened as corrupt governments,

focused primarily on extracting as much wealth as they can from their own land and citizens, see no need to cooperate with their neighbors. As the outside world has become more involved in the region, each country has come to see its neighbors as competition for aid, investment, and geopolitical clout. And no two countries are more sharply at odds than Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

“It all started in the 1920s,” said one prominent Tajikistani intellectual when I asked about Rogun. Like many conflicts in the lands of the former Soviet Union, the one between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan was both created by the Soviets and kept in check by them. Until the 20th century, notions of “Tajik” and “Uzbek” identity didn’t have much meaning. For at least a millennium of Central Asian history, people speaking Tajik and other Persian languages co-existed peacefully with those speaking Turkic languages such as Uzbek. When Russian Orientalist scholars arrived in the region in the late 19th century after Central Asia’s conquest by the tsarist empire, they were confounded by the fact that identity in Central Asia did not conform to their expectations of nationality or ethnicity. “The settled population of Central Asia think of themselves primarily as Muslims, and

The Uzbeks “do not really know what they are,” lamented a Russian scholar of the early 20th century.

think of themselves as only secondarily living in a particular town or district; to them the idea of belonging to a particular people is of no significance,” wrote Vasiliy Bartold, an early Russian scholar of Central Asia.

The Uzbeks “do not really know what they are,” lamented another Russian scholar, Ivan Zarubin, writing in the early 1900s. “They call themselves Turks. But their Turkmen and Kyrgyz neighbors call them ‘Sart,’ which word they also use for Tajiks.” (“Sart” was a plastic term, used in many different ways by people in this part of Central Asia.) Bilingualism was widespread. In the region’s austere, monophonic traditional music, *shashmaqam*, “singers switch almost unconsciously from one language to the other, and it is not uncommon to find Uzbek and Tajik couplets mixed together in the same song,” wrote scholar Theodore Levin in his study of Central Asian music, *Hundred Thousand Fools of God* (1999).

Tajikistan is the most remittance-dependent country in the world, deriving nearly half of its gross domestic product from its citizens abroad.

When the Soviet Union was formed, fitting the square peg of Central Asians' identities into the round hole of "peoples" living in separate soviet socialist republics became state policy. The new boundaries placed large groups of Uzbeks in northern Tajikistan, and Tajik-speaking people in Uzbekistan. The Soviets proceeded to codify the differences between Uzbeks and Tajiks and standardize the two languages, with Uzbek partly cleansed of its Persian elements and Tajik purged of its Turkic features. Shashmaqam was officially separated into two distinct genres. Interethnic tensions grew—Tajiks bitterly complained about the loss and "Turkification" of Bukhara and Samarqand—but the Soviets kept the lid on. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed the last constraints.

THE TWO NEW NATIONS BEGAN THEIR lives amicably enough. During Tajikistan's civil war, Uzbekistan took the side of the eventual winners—members of the ex-Communist nomenklatura and the regional clans that supported them. President Karimov was instrumental in installing Rahmon as Tajikistan's president in 1994. Indeed, at one time Rahmon referred to Karimov as "our father." But by 1997, when the civil war ended, leaving more than 50,000 dead, the two had already begun to fall out. Before long, each was accusing the other of backing rebel groups bent on overthrowing his regime.

Today, both countries stagnate under the oppressive rule of dictatorships. Uzbekistan has become a global pariah because it uses forced labor, including the toil of children, to work its cotton fields, whose output benefits a small group of politically connected businessmen. Both countries rely heavily on remittances from citizens living in Russia, where Central Asian construction workers, cleaners, and other menial laborers play a role comparable to that often taken by Mexican and Central American migrant workers in the United States. With more than a million migrants in Russia, Tajikistan has seen entire villages emptied of their working-age men. It is the most remittance-dependent country in the world,



THOMAS GRABKA / IAIF

Uzbekistan is one of the world's top cotton exporters, but its farms depend on huge quantities of water from Tajikistan and, despite international condemnation, forced labor in the fields by Uzbek adults and children.

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One huge relative advantage Uzbekistan holds over its neighbor is location. It is at the center of what was once Soviet Central Asia, with the largest population (about 30 million, almost as much as the other four “stans” combined) and the greatest concentration of industry and transportation links. Tajikistan, with just seven million people, is stuck in an especially isolated corner of this isolated region. It has boundaries with China and Kyrgyzstan, but they are far from the country's population centers and difficult to reach. The border with

Afghanistan only opens the door to more trouble. Tajikistan's only real access to the outside has been via Uzbekistan—nearly all of the railways, pipelines, and roads that reach the outside world pass through Karimov's country.

As relations have worsened, Uzbekistan has carried out what Tajikistan calls a “blockade.” It now requires Tajikistan's citizens traveling to Uzbekistan to obtain a visa, and it has mined the border since 2000. Seventy-six people have been killed as a result. The Uzbekistanis have blocked shipments of natural gas to Tajikistan, repeatedly stopped rail shipments—in one case appearing to

fabricate a terrorist attack on a key rail line—and increased cargo tariffs. On several occasions, border guards have exchanged shots across the frontier.

The divide between the countries has been widened by history—or, more precisely, by newly invented histories designed to make it seem that these are ancient states with great traditions rather than artificial creations of 20th-century Russians. For Uzbekistan, that has meant emphasizing the Turkic character of Central Asia and glorifying Tamerlane (or Amir Timur, as he is known in Uzbekistan), the 14th-century conqueror who established Turkic rule that reached into the Middle East from his capital in Samarqand. In Tajikistan, meanwhile, the need to fashion a usable past has led to the creation of a historical narrative centered on Ismail Somoni, the founder of the Persian Samanid dynasty, which ruled during the eighth and ninth centuries from Bukhara. Somoni's name now graces Tajikistan's tallest mountain, the former Mount Communism; the Tajikistanis' currency bears his name as well. In each of these national tales, the myth-spinning country avers that its rival's territory was once included in its own.

Myths aside, the two countries' disputes have become personal. In 2009,

Rahmon bragged to Tajikistani journalists (in an event that was supposed to be off the record) that he had been in two fistfights with Karimov. (Once, the two were separated by Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the other time by Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma.) Rahmon said that he had had the last word, telling Karimov, "Anyway, Samarqand and Bukhara will be ours again one day!" and vowing, "We will bring Uzbekistan to its knees." The way he would do that, he said, was with the Rogun dam.

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Tajikistan already has several hydro-power plants, including one at the world's highest dam, Nurek, at 300 meters, or just under 1,000 feet. Rogun, which could rise 35 meters higher, was designed by the Soviets, who began construction in 1976 but had not gotten very far by 1991. It was meant to be part of an integrated Central Asian power system in which water would be released from the dams in summer, when Uzbekistan needed it

for its cotton crop, while in winter Uzbekistan would supply its neighbor with electricity generated in plants burning its plentiful natural gas. (The Soviet system also included Kyrgyzstan, another upstream country, as well as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan downstream, and today there are similar though much less heated disputes among these countries.)

After 1991, this integrated system started falling apart. Uzbekistan reduced winter power supplies, and Tajikistan took more electricity than it was allotted during the summer, exercising an “unfortunate . . . lack of grid discipline,” the World Bank dryly noted in a 2012 report. Last winter, amid bitter cold, rural Tajikistanis had electricity for an average of only five to seven hours a day. In some past years, the outages have been far worse.

AS A WAY OUT OF TAJIKISTAN'S ENERGY woes and general economic dependence, Rahmon dusted off the old Soviet plans for Rogun. The dam would generate 3,600 megawatts of electricity, about as much as three nuclear power plants, almost doubling Tajikistan's capacity. That would easily meet the country's needs and provide a surplus for export.

But Tajikistan has been vexed by one singularly difficult question: Where will the money come from? Because it will cost at least \$2 billion (and up to \$6 billion) to complete the dam, foreign investment will be essential. A deal with a Russian company collapsed in 2007 after the firm reportedly proposed constructing a dam only 285 meters high, rather than the full 335 meters—not tall enough to beat the world record.

In 2009, Rahmon tried another tack. In what became known as the People's IPO, the government “offered” citizens the opportunity to buy shares in the dam, setting a goal of about \$680 per family, even though per capita income is about \$25 a month. Most in Tajikistan saw the effort as a throwback Soviet-style campaign to rally public support. But Rahmon did not rely only on PR. “Government officials at all levels and in all regions extorted money from citizens and businesses,” the U.S. State Department said in its 2010 Human Rights Report on the country. “Teachers, doctors, and government employees were instructed to buy shares or their employers would fire them. University students were forced to show their professors share certificates before being allowed to sit for exams. Businesses were told they would be assessed fines for

failing to purchase shares.” In the end, the government collected less than \$200 million. But work on the dam got started, though at a very slow pace, according to local residents.

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In 2011, the World Bank agreed to underwrite two technical assessments of the Rogun proposal. Although the bank has made it clear that it does not intend to fund the dam, a favorable assessment could encourage potential investors, including the Asian Development Bank, Russia, China, and Iran. With foreign funding, of course, would come geopolitical complications: Any backer trying to gain clout in Central Asia would have to weigh the consequences of alienating regional power Uzbekistan. The United States, which relies on the Central Asian countries for various forms of logistics cooperation for the war in Afghanistan, has tiptoed around the Rogun issue, though Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed doubts about the value of hydropower

projects when she visited Tajikistan’s capital, Dushanbe, in 2011.

The same U.S. intelligence report that warned last year of coming conflicts over water around the world also noted that “historically, water tensions have led to more water-sharing agreements than violent conflicts.” In theory, there is great potential for such agreements in Central Asia. The region has the highest per capita rate of water consumption in the world, and inefficient agriculture is the chief culprit. While about 75 percent of the fresh water consumed in the world is devoted to agriculture, in Central Asia that figure is over 90 percent.

It was folly of the Soviets to establish such a thirsty crop as cotton in this part of the world. By diverting Central Asian rivers to irrigate the fields, they caused the greatest ecological disaster of the Soviet era: the drying up of the Aral Sea. Poor management and dilapidated infrastructure have compounded the water problem many times over. The World Bank has pushed for various reforms, including water conservation measures in Uzbekistan and utility price increases in Tajikistan to reduce consumption of electricity, but neither country seems interested in changing its ways, preferring to use Rogun for high-stakes brinksmanship.

Rahmon's promotion of Rogun has been accompanied by a growing predilection for the grandiose and megalomaniacal. He seems to have begun emulating the cults of personality and Dubai-style architectural excesses of leaders in nearby countries, especially Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. But those countries all enjoy substantial oil and natural gas income. Nevertheless, Rahmon has in recent years gone on a building spree, erecting several ornate new structures in Dushanbe's formerly modest center, including the massive, Doric-columned Palace of Nations (which reportedly cost about \$300 million to build and now sits largely empty) and the world's tallest flagpole, which, topping out at 541 feet, is visible from almost the entire city.

For Rahmon, Rogun seems to have taken on a symbolic significance greater than its practical value. In Dushanbe, diplomats and officials of international nongovernmental organizations—who have a nearly unanimously poor view of the president and his capabilities—say he has seized on Rogun as a single solution to all of the country's problems. "Rogun has become a symbol of how he can break free of everything," said one longtime Dushanbe-based diplomat. "He thinks that he has found the pana-

cea for his reputation, his legacy." Others suggest that Rahmon, who began his career as a collective farm leader, still sees development in Soviet terms—the Rogun dam certainly has all the appearances of a classic Soviet-style, top-down megaproject.

There is also a simpler explanation: money. Rahmon's government is deeply corrupt, and anyone with money in Tajikistan can be traced through very few degrees of separation to the president. "Tajikistan's elite appears driven by one overwhelming motive: self-enrichment," the International Crisis Group concluded in a 2009 report. The Rogun dam would create the potential for massive amounts of graft. In fact, one obstacle to obtaining foreign financing is that the accounting of the state power company and other Tajik entities that would be involved is opaque, and the government has resisted efforts to get them to open their books.

THE WORLD BANK ASSESSMENT IS scheduled to be released at the end of this year. It will not give the project blanket approval or disapproval but will evaluate three different variants of the proposed dam, two of which would fall short of Rahmon's 335-meter goal. It will be up to the Tajikistan government,

and whoever funds the project, to weigh those options. But early indications have been positive for Tajikistan. In February, the World Bank's regional director, Saroj Kumar Jha, said that the findings on dam safety, water management, and flood risk—all concerns that Uzbekistan has raised—were, so far, positive.

Karimov's invocation of water wars was likely hyperbole, but given the rising tensions and increasing frequency of border skirmishes, there is a risk of "low-level armed conflict" between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, according to a report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The United Nations is trying to conduct shuttle diplomacy between the two countries and has enlisted Kazakhstan to act as mediator.

It is impossible to predict how Uzbekistan will respond if the World Bank assessment is positive and a funder steps forward. It is a common belief in Dushanbe that Uzbekistan has plans, once the dam is almost complete, to launch air strikes against it or to carry out sabotage disguised as a terrorist act. And Uzbekistan retains the ability to cripple construction efforts with a blockade.

In theory, the dam could be beneficial to Uzbekistan. Tied in with the existing Nurek dam, it could allow the restoration of the kind of resource-sharing scheme

that prevailed in the Soviet era. Karimov has even voiced interest in the past in participating in a more modest version of the Rogun project. But given the mutual acrimony, and his belief—probably correct—that part of why Rahmon wants the dam is to exert control over Uzbekistan, Karimov is unlikely to see anything but harm in the facility's construction. "If there were a pro-Uzbekistan government in Tajikistan, no doubt Uzbekistan's attitude to Rogun would be different," said an activist in Dushanbe.

Tajikistan will hold presidential elections in November, and though the constitution would seem to prevent Rahmon from running for a fourth term, no one expects such a technicality to keep him from trying to hold on to power. A leader of the most popular opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, was badly beaten outside his home in April. Police raided the home of another politician shortly after he announced the formation of a new party and charged him with embezzlement and polygamy. Opposition to Rahmon appears to be growing, and it is nearly universal among the educated elite.

Rahmon's government seems to be tightening its controls over society. On my most recent visit, I was unable to get official accreditation to work as a journalist

in Tajikistan, though I have done so easily on two previous occasions. Government officials declined to talk to me, and local journalists and experts spoke only on condition of anonymity, expressing fear that speaking to a foreign journalist could expose them to unwanted attention from the authorities, even when their comments about Rogun were positive.

Still, there is little dissent within Tajikistan on the subject of Rogun. People who generally oppose the government believe that building the dam is the best way for Tajikistan to free itself from Uzbekistan's stranglehold. Even those in communities that would be displaced by the project—where resistance was strong during the Soviet era—have come to see it as a national necessity. During the People's IPO, Muhiddin Kabiri, the leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party and Tajikistan's most principled opposition figure, said the party would buy shares.

“For Uzbekistan it's a political issue,

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but for Tajikistan it's an issue of survival,” said the Dushanbe activist. In a similar vein, a prominent local analyst told me, “It's a question of resisting control. The Uzbekistan elite and intelligentsia still consider Tajikistan part of ‘greater Uzbekistan.’ This is a part of their official ideology.” He added, “Now, Tajikistan doesn't have any levers to withstand this pressure. This would be a lever.” ■

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