

## TAJIKISTAN: THE WEAK LINK

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After the terrible bloodshed of a civil war came to an end in 1997 having bled the country white, having claimed more than 50,000 lives in five years, pushed a tenth of the population onto the roads leading to exile and left the country in a quasi-general state of bankruptcy with an economy in ruins and endemic food shortages, with widespread cancer of corruption whereby assistance from donors such as international organisations, the United States and the European Union inevitably disappears mysteriously in roundabout mafia subterfuges, and governed by the iron fist of its stainless steel<sup>1</sup> President, Emomali Rakhmon,<sup>2</sup> Tajikistan appears forever unable to get free of its tragic fate foreshadowed by its descent into the Underworld.

This country of more than 7 million is geographically situated at the crossroads of the main geopolitical competing interests that the Central Asian states represent. Its neighbour to the south, Afghanistan, with which it shares a 'sieve like' border of nearly 1,200 km, is ravaged by crime and an Islamist insurrection that has broken out afresh. Its large and inhibiting western neighbour, Uzbekistan, which in the past was its mentor and ally, is now considered to be hostile due to the personal animosity which characterises the relations between their two presidents and many conflicts over sharing water resources. The Ferghana Valley, which straddles its territory and that of Kirghizstan and Uzbekistan, has long been a source of endemic violent Islamist agitation. Finally, its territory constitutes the turntable of much illicit international trade in drugs and arms.

A failed or nearly-failed state, Tajikistan is the weakest of the Central Asian states. Its regime owes its present survival only to the fact that it was able to prevent a return of the civil war which left the population deeply traumatised. Many experts believe that the countdown to the implosion of Tajikistan has started ticking: the only question which remains open is the timing, the shape and the consequences, on the national and regional levels, of the disintegration of what has seemed ever more to be the weak link of Central Asia.

What threats does the country face and what are the bounds of action for the national authorities and for the international community?

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<sup>1</sup> Elected for the first time in 1994, in the midst of the civil war, Emomali Rakhmon was reelected in 1999. At that time, the new '*post-civil war*' constitution did not provide for more than one term in office. A timely revision of the constitution in 2003 allowed him to run for a second term (<http://www.rferl.org/content/Article/1071584.html>).

<sup>2</sup> Better known by his name Rakhmonov until 2007 when he institutionalised by decree the removal from family names of the suffixes which Russified them.

## 1) THE ISLAMIST THREAT

The invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 by Russian troops constituted the point of departure of Islamic activism in Central Asia. Instead of strengthening the Communist grip on Afghanistan and creating a buffer zone between the USSR of that time and the radical Arabs, the Afghan misadventure of the Red Army contributed to the radicalisation of Afghan and Pakistani Islamists. It also enabled the Afghan insurgents to spread their religious message in Central Asia. Three main events took responsibility for accelerating this Central Asian Islamisation: the pitiful retreat of Russian troops from Afghanistan in 1989, the collapse two years later of the Soviet empire (with, as backdrop, the accession to power of corrupt dictators at the head of the new Central Asian republics) and the annihilation of the Communist regime in Afghanistan in 1992.

For many Near Eastern Islamists, these three events gave rise to the idea that the conditions had come together for the creation of Islamic states on the Central Asian ruins of the Soviet empire. The commitment of the Saudi and Emirates authorities to the Afghan Mujahedin was aimed not only at defeating the Soviets. Riyadh and the capitals of the Gulf saw in Afghanistan an ideal base for the expansion of Wahhabism and Salafism – the regional version of their Sunni faith – and an ideal counter-fire to the Messianic designs of the Shiite Mullahs of Iran. Under the benevolent leadership of Saudi Arabia, many NGOs from the Arab states of the Gulf established themselves more or less openly in Central Asia with their customary ‘kits’ of services : health care, training, education and religious indoctrination.

The descendants of many Central Asian Muslims who, during the 1920s and 1930s, fled the arrival and repression imposed by the Bolsheviks and later struck it rich in the oil states of the Gulf contributed financially to the Islamic renaissance in their distant homelands.

### a. The shade of Al-Qaeda

It was during the civil war in Tajikistan that we first saw the appearance of Al-Qaeda elements, especially Wali Khan Amin Shah (who was arrested in Malaysia in 1995) and Ibn-ul-Khattab, who later became famous as the ‘*Commander of the Foreign Mujahedin*’ in the Caucasus. After his departure for the Sudan, Ossama ben Laden continued to direct the training camps in Afghanistan where many Tajiks, Uzbeks, Uighurs and Chechens received a military education.

However there were two reasons why during the last few years Al-Qaeda has restricted its role in Central Asia to simply establishing contact and providing military assistance which has been more symbolic than real. To begin with, in this region there has not been any sufficiently big target whose destruction would fit within the overall objective of undermining American power. Secondly, there is the importance of Central Asia in the view of Ossama ben Laden, in the area of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), whether nuclear, bacteriological or chemical. By keeping a low profile, he has been able to pursue his quarry of WMD without attracting too much attention to himself.

In a letter dated June 2002 addressed to the Mullah Omar and published on the internet site of the ‘*Centre of Counter-terrorism*.<sup>3</sup> of the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, Ossama ben Laden described the growing importance of Central Asia in the holy war against the United States. He announced that the ‘*new military opportunities*’ presented themselves to Al-Qaeda in this region. In particular, he mentioned the success of cooperation with the ‘*brothers of Tajikistan*’ (training and supply of arms) and launched a pressing appeal for unity among all in the pursuit of the ‘*Jihad in Central Asia, the only means of getting our enemies out of Afghanistan.*’ He concluded this letter with the reminder that ‘*this region is*

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<sup>3</sup> [http://ctc.usma.edu/aq/aq\\_600321.asp](http://ctc.usma.edu/aq/aq_600321.asp)

*particularly attractive because of the many military resources which it contains, both conventional and nonconventional, which will be called upon to play a role of prime importance in the Jihad against the enemies of Islam.'*

The ability of A-Qaeda leaders to separate out the essential things from the subsidiary constitutes one of their main characteristics. Taking his inspiration from Leo Tolstoy, who in *War and Peace*, said that '*time and patience are the absolute weapons*,' Ossama ben Laden thinks that time is playing in his favour in Central Asia.

The repression of Islamist movements in the region and in China, the growing interest of the Central Asian Muslims in conservative Islam, the proselytism of NGOs sponsored by the Gulf States, the exponential growth of Afghan drug and trafficking networks and the steady rise in power of the subversive Islamist organisation *Hizb-ut Tahrir*<sup>4</sup> in this region are the factors of trouble which are least costly in men and resources, and much more profitable for Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

### **b. The Islamic Rebirth Party**

In Tajikistan, the *Islamic Rebirth Party* (IRP) is now the only Islamic political party permitted to operate on the territory of the ex-Soviet empire. Founded in 1990 despite a ban by the authorities of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Tajikistan, it quickly emerged on the political scene. Its existence was made legal after the proclamation of independence in September 1991. It was violently opposed to the Communist Party and was banned in 1993 for its involvement in the civil war alongside the United Opposition and for trying to install an Islamic regime.

From their exile in Iran and in Afghanistan, its leaders regrouped within the movement of the United Tajik Opposition and, until 1996, fought the authorities in power. Upon the signing of the peace agreements, the IRP and the United Tajik Opposition returned to the country. The activities of the IRP were again legalised in 1999 and it quickly became the second force on the Tajik political scene. In the legislative elections of 2005, it won 8% of the votes and two seats out of 63 in the Parliament.

In 2006, its leader, Mukhiddin Kabiri, created a surprise when he announced his intention not to be a candidate in the presidential election. This strategy seems to fit into a long term political vision. Its staff work discretely at the local level to establish a solid base among the people. Betting on the weariness of the population, the IRP seeks to appear as a credible alternative. The only party to base its actions on spiritual ideology, it seems well placed to reach power when the population decides to put an end to the reign of corruption and to the very weighty hierarchical relations which characterise the political and social situation. The moral of one of the fables of La Fontaine – '*Patience and the fullness of time do more than force or fury*.'<sup>5</sup> – seems to have really become the line of conduct of the leader of this party.

The only unknown factor for which there presently is no answer is what shape a regime directed by the IRP would take, as well as the uncertainty over the way the the great powers = led by the United States and Russia – would react to the emergence in the region of a government led by an openly Islamic political party.

### **c. Taking the religious movement in hand and governmental entryism**

Faced with this Islamic renewal, the authorities have hardened their tone. In February 2007, they ordered the destruction of 13 of the 148 undeclared mosques in Dushanbe, accorded a

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<sup>4</sup> *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Party of the Liberation) is devoted to the main objective of restoring the Caliphate, i.e., the authority of the successor of the prophet of Islam charged with making Islamic law rule over the whole Muslim community.

<sup>5</sup> The Lion and the Rat.

delay to 28 of them so that they might present a request for approval and proceeded with the closure of the rest. Officially, the capital only has 29 authorised mosques.<sup>6</sup>

One month later, during a speech to entrepreneurs,<sup>7</sup> President Emomali Rakhmon indicated his preference for seeing investments oriented towards ‘*new enterprises and schools instead of new mosques.*’ Though his audience seems mostly to have approved of these remarks, many made known privately their doubts about the possibilities of investments in an economic environment which is entirely in the hands of the President, those close to him and the satraps who surround him.<sup>8</sup>

The outlawing in January of the *Salafi School of Islam* movement, which was accused of ties with terrorist groups and religious activism, underlines a new stiffening of attitude by the Tajik authorities. For Public Prosecutor General Bobojon Bobokhonov, the Salafist movement ‘*did not break the law, but its propaganda threatens state security*’<sup>9</sup> and, consequently, its ban was motivated by the need ‘*to protect the constitutional order and strengthen national security.*’

The latest developments of governmental entryism in religious affairs were the adoption at the start of March by the lower chamber of the Tajik Parliament of a law on religious organisations and religious education.<sup>10</sup> Presented as putting the religions on a level basis, it in fact takes the side of the Hanafite branch,<sup>11</sup> which has a nearly 80% majority within the Tajik population. For Félix Corley, of the Forum 18, the Norwegian Observation Group of religious freedoms, ‘*the Tajik authorities are getting involved in a similar way to the Uzbek authorities, meaning a draconian system of controlling the religious movement.*’<sup>12</sup> He believes that this action fits within a pattern that is very widespread among the Central Asian republics – the strengthening of restrictive laws – as, for example, in Kirghizstan, or new laws coming into force in January in Kazakhstan, where identical laws are on the point of being approved by the constitutional council.

## **2) THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC THREATS**

### **a. Food Crisis**

After a terrible winter in 2008 - the worst in 44 years – followed by a spring and summer that broke all records,<sup>13</sup> reaching temperatures well above the seasonal averages, Tajikistan now figures on the list of 32 countries identified in the latest report of the FAO (*UN Food and Agriculture Organisation*<sup>14</sup>). According to the FAO, the food situation of its inhabitants and the forecasts of harvests require urgent outside aid that can be estimated to amount to many hundreds of thousands of Euros.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/latestnews/2007320/44977.htm>

<sup>7</sup> <http://tajikistan.neweurasia.net/2007/03/16/rahmonov-vs-islamization-in-tajikistan/>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eavo21009a.shtml>

<sup>10</sup>

[http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik\\_Parliament\\_Chamber\\_Approves\\_Bill\\_On\\_Religion/1505253.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik_Parliament_Chamber_Approves_Bill_On_Religion/1505253.html)

<sup>11</sup> The Hanafite branch is the oldest of the theological, moral, juridical and jurisprudential schools among the Sunnis. It arose from the teaching of the Imam Abū Hanīfa an-Nu'man ibn Thābit who gave it his name.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> <http://ochaonline.un.org/cap2005/webpage.asp?Page=1699>.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.fao.org/docrep/011/ai480e/ai480e02.htm>

## **b. Energy Crisis**

Ever since 1 January, as in all the preceding winters, the population has had to face electricity rationing. Except for 'vital zones' – hospitals and administrative buildings –, the capital Dushanbe is supplied only 11 hours per day.<sup>15</sup> Apart from the fact that production at the hydroelectric plant in Norak – accounting for 70% of the country's needs – is gravely compromised by the inexorable fall of the water level in the reservoir that feeds it, Tajikistan saw during last December an interruption by Uzbekistan in its imports of electricity from Turkmenistan - 13 million kWh. At issue is a dispute over payment of transit rights claimed by Uzbekistan and criticised by Tajikistan as being exorbitant.

## **c. Economic Crisis**

### ***i. At the edge of bankruptcy***

Tajikistan was badly hit by the financial crisis. Its main exports - aluminium and cotton – collapsed. Export of cotton alone represents 1/5 of revenues from foreign trade, and the cotton industry employs nearly half the active population. The authorities are presently negotiating with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) over the details of a loan of 155 million Euros. The Central Bank has intervened many times to support the national currency and drew down gold and hard currency reserves, which in February had fallen from 270 million Euros to less than 150.

### ***ii. The time bomb of migrant workers***

The persistence of the world economic crisis now threatens the return to Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan of hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of workers who have gone abroad. Just in Russia, many hundreds of thousands of Tajik workers are trying to survive as best they can.<sup>16</sup>

The authorities are trying to anticipate their return by exploring various possibilities: in particular, the setting up of very small enterprises thanks to microcredits, the launch of training programmes and the allocation of plots of land.<sup>17</sup> However, many former migrants are not persuaded of the effectiveness of such measures and continue to consider Russia (82%), Kazakhstan, (6%), and Belarus, Ukraine, Kirghizstan and Uzbekistan as eldorados for migrants seeking employment.

According to the Tajik Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Shukurjon Zuhurov, its services have counted '*in the public and private sectors and in all the branches of the industrial sector around 150,000 positions available for former migrant workers.*'<sup>18</sup> Separately, he has said that the government is thinking very seriously these past few weeks about sending between 20,000 and 50,000 workers per year to South Korea, to Qatar and to other Arab states.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> <http://tajikistan.neweurasia.net/>

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[http://www.rferl.org/content/Seven\\_Dead\\_In\\_Fire\\_In\\_Moscow\\_Underground\\_Car\\_Park/1369470.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Seven_Dead_In_Fire_In_Moscow_Underground_Car_Park/1369470.html)

<sup>17</sup>

[http://www.rferl.org/content/As\\_Work\\_Dries\\_Up\\_Central\\_Asian\\_Migrant\\_Workers\\_Return\\_Home/1490902.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/As_Work_Dries_Up_Central_Asian_Migrant_Workers_Return_Home/1490902.html)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>

[http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajikistan\\_To\\_Expand\\_Labor\\_Migration\\_To\\_Mideast\\_Asia/1373845.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajikistan_To_Expand_Labor_Migration_To_Mideast_Asia/1373845.html)

Official statistics put the number of Tajik workers who have left to work abroad at 800,000. The same official sources tell us that these workers are in the age group of 20-30 years old and 92% are men. During 2008 there was an increase of nearly 200,000 migrant workers compared to 2007. However, it seems that these statistics are far from reflecting the reality of the situation. In fact, the 800,000 workers officially announced coincide with the quotas agreed with Moscow. It would seem likely that the international organisations must estimate the number of migrants at slightly more than 1.5 million and it appears from studies undertaken on this population that they are pushed to leave by low salaries and endemic unemployment.

### **3) LOOKING FOR THE WAY OUT**

These various threats, whether individually or taken together, run a certain risk for Tajikistan. Though it is unlikely that this implosion will take the form of an Islamic revolution in the Iranian style, one can reasonably envisage a popular uprising. The conditions are there and no one doubts that it is likely the Islamists who would harvest the benefits. The political opposition is too disunited, weakened and marginalised to be able to claim a major role. The *Islamic Rebirth Party* would constitute the only alternative which might emerge from this collapse. Apparently aware of the danger which they are running, the Tajik authorities are looking for solutions both on the internal and on the external level.

#### **a. Political initiative**

For the first time since independence in 1991, on January 30 President Emomali Rakhmon entrusted the all-powerful post of Minister of the Interior to an individual who does not come from inside his '*first circle*' and above all from his native region of Kulob. The family roots of the new minister, General Abdurahim Kahhorov, are located in the northern region of Sughd, a region in which he was, until his ministerial promotion, the chief of police.

According to many analysts, this nomination is intended essentially to give a boost to the national unity as it faces growing tensions with Uzbekistan. During his last official visit to Uzbekistan in January, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said, to the great displeasure of the Tajik authorities, that he believed that the '*hydroelectric projects in Central Asia should take into account the considerations of neighbouring countries.*'<sup>20</sup> In this statement he meant, without naming it, the hydroelectric project of Roghun, a project for which Tadjikistan has been waiting 5 years for Russia to honour its promise of 1.5 billion Euros of financing and which Uzbekistan views unfavourably because it fears it will worsen its water shortages.

On 19 February, just before the visit of President Emomali Rakhmon to Moscow, an agreement which deals with the rescheduling of Tajik debt to Uzbekistan – 12.5 million Euros – was signed. This agreement, which also touches upon the sensitive problem of sharing water, should, in the view of specialists, contribute to an improvement in relations between the two countries.<sup>21</sup>

#### **b. Diplomatic initiative**

This diplomatic initiative underwent sudden acceleration following two unrelated events : the Uzbek-Russian rapprochement of January over the hydroelectric projects and the eviction of

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[http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik\\_Leader\\_Arrives\\_In\\_Moscow\\_With\\_More\\_Leverage\\_Less\\_Faith/1498425.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik_Leader_Arrives_In_Moscow_With_More_Leverage_Less_Faith/1498425.html)

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajikistan\\_Uzbekistan\\_Sign\\_Deal\\_On\\_Power\\_Water/1495827.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajikistan_Uzbekistan_Sign_Deal_On_Power_Water/1495827.html)

American forces from the base at Manas in Kirghizistan. The two events led President Rakhmon to seek, in Brussels, a life raft from the European Union and NATO.

***i. Brussels tropisms ...***

The visit to Brussels of President Rakhmon killed two birds with one stone. It allowed him to show the European authorities as well as those of NATO evident signs of his desire for cooperation. According to Marat Mamadshoev, editor-in-chief of the magazine *Asia Plus*, ‘*the situation of conflict between Tajikistan, on the one side, and Uzbekistan and Russia, on the other, is a signal, for the Europeans, that the Tajik authorities seem ready to envisage a new format in their relations with Europe and a more advanced cooperation.*’<sup>22</sup> It remains to be seen what importance the EU is ready to accord to Tajikistan and what it expects from this country.

During this visit, he met with the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, and Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, the Secretary General of NATO. Just before flying to Brussels, President Rakhmon made a gesture of good will and an overture by announcing that his country would not oppose allowing the transit of NATO’s (nonmilitary) logistical resupply. This offer is well timed for the Atlantic Alliance, which since the loss of the base at Manas, has been looking for a Central Asian support which would facilitate its efforts on behalf of operations in Afghanistan. It makes of Tajikistan, a border state with Afghanistan, a partner of choice, both for the cultural and linguistic bonds which it shares with Kabul.

***ii. ... and temptations of Moscow***

By opening up to the EU and NATO, Emomali Rakhmon seems to wish to take his inspiration from the Kirghiz example as regards relations with Moscow. He believes that he might receive assistance similar to what his counterpart in Bishkek has just received – a loan of 1.5 billion Euros and 120 million of financial aid – for evicting the American forces from the base at Manas. During bilateral talks in November 2008, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev expressed the wish to be able to rent a second base, at Ayní to the north of the capital, like the one in Dushanbe<sup>23</sup> which Russian troops already use. Otherwise, Russia rents facilities at the satellite centre of Okno, near the city of Nurek to the southeast of Dushanbe, where Moscow has a favourable post for observing the space activities of the giant Chinese neighbour.

All these considerations might push Moscow to quickly find a compromise with Emomali Rakhmon. Tajikistan remains an important partner for Moscow in more than one respect. First, it is an essential geopolitical pawn which could play a certain role in the stabilisation of Afghanistan. Then, its major natural resources, especially uranium which the Russians now need, and other rare metals just waiting to be extracted. They give Russian industrialists an excellent opportunity for fruitful investments.

Moscow has thus certainly not said its final word and, like many of his Central Asian counterparts, President Emomali Rakhmon will have to engage in some subtle bargaining and show his ability in a dangerous balancing act in his relations and talks with the Westerners and with Russia.

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[http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik\\_Leader\\_Arrives\\_In\\_Moscow\\_With\\_More\\_Leverage\\_Less\\_Faith/1498425.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik_Leader_Arrives_In_Moscow_With_More_Leverage_Less_Faith/1498425.html)

<sup>23</sup> Headquarters of the 201<sup>st</sup> division of motorised rifle-men consisting of 7,500 men, the greatest Russian military contingent presently deployed outside of Russia.

#### 4) CONCLUSION

In issue number 35 of the *Global Europe Anticipation Bulletin*<sup>24</sup>, the European Laboratory of Prospective Analysis estimated that the global systemic crisis which began in 2006, would beginning at the end of this year enter into a phase which analysts of this laboratory call ‘*a phase of worldwide geopolitical dislocation.*’ Three years after this prediction, ‘*there remains just a tiny window of opportunity to try to avoid the worst, meaning in the four months to come till the summer of 2009.*’ Failing this, the governments ‘*will lose all control over events, including, for a number of them, in their own countries, so that the planet will enter into this phase of geopolitical dislocation like a drunken ship.*’ At the end of this phase of geopolitical dislocation, the world risks resembling more Europe as it was in 1913 than the Europe of 2009, with its parade of conflicts, civil wars and riots.

Tajikistan shows all the clinical symptoms of a failed state and its survival up to the present day is something of a miracle. The state is barely more stable now than it was a bit more than ten years ago when it emerged from civil war. Whole regions are cut off geographically and do not have any administration worthy of the name; they are completely disconnected from the government and have been left to fend for themselves. Although the regime of President Emomali Rakhmon has not yet collapsed, that is only due to the fact that until now it has not had to confront a political crisis or major natural catastrophe. Governed from day to day by autistic, deaf and blind rulers, it survives only thanks to some expedients. Without the subsidies of the international community and remittances of money which a million migrant workers send home each month, it would have been unable to pay its bills long ago.

Added to the catastrophic forecasts of the European Laboratory, the worrisome economic prospects for 2009 should prove to be dramatic for Tajikistan. All the conditions are there and the count down to the implosion of Tajikistan seems about to begin. What is certain is that the collapse of the weakest link in Central Asia could have a devastating effect which could send a shock wave and carry off the immediate neighbours of Uzbekistan and Kirghizstan, which are both also fragile and vulnerable. Such an eventuality would not leave the international community unmoved, because the predictable maelström – a conflagration which the journalist Pepe Escobar, staff member of the on line magazine *Asia Times*, calls the ‘*Pipelineistan*’<sup>25</sup> could dramatically redraw the energy map of a large part of the world.

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<sup>24</sup> [http://www.leap2020.eu/GEAB-N-32-Sommaire\\_a2797.html](http://www.leap2020.eu/GEAB-N-32-Sommaire_a2797.html)

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central\\_Asia/KC26Ago1.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/KC26Ago1.html)