



## **WATER DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA**

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*Shared water resources have caused serious disputes and tensions in Central Asia since the USSR's collapse. Management of these resources has been highly politicized. This article analyzes the foreign policies of four countries on this issue and implications that disputes have on them.*

The end of communism brought the emergence of 15 new states, former Soviet republics, which despite having their own character had long been isolated from the world and restrained from pursuing their interests. Among them are five Central Asian countries-- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan-- which gained their independence in 1991.

Aside from the political changes brought about by independence, these countries have sought to transform their economies from a centralized command economy to a market-based one. In addition, they have become involved in disputes among themselves in part due to their artificially created borders. Some of these disputes began during the years of Soviet rule. Aside from conflicts over resources, the ambitions of Russia, Iran, Turkey, and China have turned Central Asia into a highly conflict-prone region.

This article explores the nature of disputes and methods to solve them relating to the joint use of water resources in Central Asia for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. While Turkmenistan also has some involvement in these issues they are of lesser importance for that country, which is focused on developing its gas sector and reducing its own high water use caused by dependence on cotton production.

### **GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BASIS OF CONFLICTS**

Central Asia is a dry and arid region with immensely diverse topography ranging from high mountains and glaciers to vast and dry steppes and deserts. The region is rich in water resources but more than 90 percent are concentrated in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The region's two main rivers, Syr Darya and Amu Darya, originate in these two countries, while Uzbekistan, the single biggest consumer of water, and Turkmenistan, are located downstream. As much as 40 percent of the region's water resources are concentrated solely in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, as a result of rivalry between Russia and Britain, the region was divided into three parts. The eastern part went to China, the southern part came under British domination, and the rest--which today constitutes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan-- was taken by Russia which, however, left the existing governmental and social system largely in place. In the early 1920s, following long resistance, the region was annexed to the USSR.<sup>2</sup>

Soviet rule dramatically changed the social structure, economy, and even its environment, bringing about both modernization and destruction. Many of the people living in the mountains were relocated to lower-lying areas to cultivate cotton. Large numbers of Slavic peoples came as immigrants from other parts of the USSR. The central government also attacked the indigenous cultures, outlawing

Islam. Forced collectivization, mandated social change, ecological shifts, and repression brought suffering and new problems.<sup>3</sup>

One of the issues that has left enduring legacies is the redrawing of the boundaries between republics which carried over into the post-Soviet era. The new borders did not respect any historical or national legacies, leaving huge minorities of one nation inside another republic and creating complicated frontiers which undermined political relations and made economic development more difficult.

These boundary lines created situations which today could become sources of conflict. The Fergana valley, the most fertile, densely populated area in the region, was divided among Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. It has been turned into a major cotton-producing valley during Soviet rule. In those days, the production system ignored the republics' frontiers. For example, water reservoirs for the irrigation of cotton in Uzbekistan were constructed in Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz cotton was ginned in Uzbekistan and the route between them ran through Tajikistan. These arrangements have been disrupted since independence, effectively paralyzing the whole valley, causing widespread poverty and social discontent.

Some parts of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are reachable only through the territory of Uzbekistan. The northern parts of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are cut off from their southern parts most of the year. Since gaining independence, Uzbekistan has pursued a policy of isolation from its neighbors. It has restricted the road transport going through its territory, accusing neighboring countries of exporting extremism.

Rising water consumption began when the region was turned into a huge cotton plantation in the 1960s and the 1970s. An impressive irrigation network, canals, and reservoirs were built to serve cotton production. As a result, the region has become one of the world's biggest

cotton producers, with Uzbekistan alone producing and exporting as much as four million tons of cotton annually. However, this development has had disastrous effects on the environment. The region's two major rivers--Amu Darya and Syr Darya--were almost fully diverted for cotton irrigation. As a result the water level in the Aral Sea, which is fed by these two rivers, fell by seven meters in twenty years, from 1964 till 1984. This worst man-made disaster in the world has also damaged the population's health. Infant mortality in surrounding areas has reached 110 deaths for every 1000 births, one of the highest in the world.<sup>4</sup>

The Soviet regime built huge water reservoirs in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan primarily for the cotton production in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Several hydropower stations were also built. Power grids in the region were united into a single regional network. Through this network, upstream countries exported electrical power to downstream countries during the winter, and imported from them during the summer when water was drawn to cotton fields. Coordination of the water flows to the cotton fields during the hot season was managed from Moscow, by the ministry of irrigation.

In the 1980s, Soviet planners developed another ambitious project to divert Siberian rivers to the region in order to provide even more water for the cotton industry. This project was not implemented due to warnings of its dangerous environmental implications. But today some are trying to revive this project. For example, at a conference on the water shortage and Aral problem, a top Uzbekistan official urged close cooperation with Russia to divert two Siberian rivers, the Irtysh and Ob, to Central Asia.<sup>5</sup>

In the opening years of the twenty-first century, however, the region has been experiencing the worst drought in a century. The water shortage has also brought declining cotton, rice, and other agricultural production eroding living standards. Severe environmental crisis, combined with

already widespread poverty and the region's security tensions, make the region prone to any uprising or long-term conflict.

### **POST-INDEPENDENCE CONFLICTS**

By the end of 1980s, water distribution and border disputes led to open confrontations which were suppressed by Moscow. But when the Soviet Union collapsed, water usage, which had previously been a domestic issue, suddenly became a subject of international mediation. A zero-sum game developed over water, and each of the now sovereign countries, enshrined the concept of "sovereignty over resources" in its national constitution.

In 1991 all Central Asian countries gained their independence from the Soviet Union though they were not well prepared for this step, especially given their tightly integrated economies and dependence on joint infrastructure and common resources. Moreover, the vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet empire brought competition among other powers for influence in the area. One of the new countries' first acts was the establishment of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination, in 1992.

The region is rich in oil, minerals, and other natural resources. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, with their oil and gas fields, have attracted foreign investment. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have capitalized on their cotton and mineral industries. Kyrgyzstan has sought to develop its gold industry and hydropower production. In geopolitical terms, the region is at the crossroads of several rival powers--Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and India--all of which have or are seeking regional domination. The United States has also been extending its influence into the area, leading some forces in Russia to call for a "more ambitious" policy to regain its role there.<sup>6</sup>

In some ways, these shifts can benefit the region, attracting aid and investment while reducing their dependency on Russia. But they can also make the area

into a battleground of the world's powers for the control of oil resources, especially when coupled with internal problems that include disputed borders, rising poverty, social discontent at the non-democratic regimes, and the emergence of militant Islamist groups. Notable in this context was the civil war in Tajikistan during the 1990s that involved both internal and foreign--particularly Russian--intervention.<sup>7</sup>

Water is a key issue in the region. Ninety percent of the water resources are concentrated in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while the main consumers--Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan--can supply only 14 percent and 45 percent, respectively, of their water needs. Uzbekistan alone consumes more than half the region's water resources. As a result, though, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan control the water needed by Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The upstream states view water as a commodity for trade and profit, especially since they are poorly endowed with other resources. Control over water is also important for them as they need it to generate much of their own power needs.<sup>8</sup>

These differences can often be settled through negotiation but the relative leverage of the two sides shifts during the year. In summer, the downstream countries have less leverage given their high water needs, while in winter the consumer states have the advantage because they can cut off their coal and gas supplies or restrict transport on their roads. A large number of bilateral agreements have been signed to manage these issues. For example, between 1997 and 2004, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan alone signed ten agreements and held a large number of meetings. Uzbekistan's gas and Kyrgyzstan's water are major bargaining chips in this relationship.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Uzbekistan has some control over the supply of water to southern parts of Kazakhstan which at times it has reduced, triggering angry protests by Kazakh peasants, as well as high-level political dispute between the two countries.

The existence of border disputes intensifies these problems. This is

especially evident in the case of Uzbekistan, which has border disputes with all countries of the region. The most acute tensions exist between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan over two enclaves that belong to the latter. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan also claim parts of each other's territories. Numerous clashes have occurred on the Tajik-Uzbek and Kyrgyz-Uzbek borders, leading to the closing of frontiers and--especially by Uzbekistan--laying of minefields.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the signing of many water agreements, however, the results have been unstable. Countries have broken their commitments at times when their leverage was greater and they thus believed they could obtain a better deal. Leaders are under constant domestic pressure--especially from farmers--to improve the terms of these arrangements. This does not apply only to the upstream countries but also to the downstream ones.

International factors also change the relative leverage of these states. The upstream countries are allies of Russia, while downstream countries pursue a policy of distancing themselves from Russia and its influence. Although the link between the geopolitical situation of one or more of the countries, and water conflicts is not direct, Russian influence certainly gives an additional leverage to upstream countries.

Growing concerns over the falling level of water in the Aral Sea and its disastrous consequences have added another factor. International agencies, including the World Bank, the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have offered assistance while also pressuring countries to regulate the water flow in order to prevent the Aral Sea from drying up even more. Thus, the situation is extremely complex.

In the downstream countries of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, especially in the latter, the political leadership is heavily dependent on the cotton industry, the single biggest sector and consumer of water. Kazakhstan is an exporter of wheat. Other

pressures also exist in these countries. Widespread poverty in rural areas has encouraged militant and separatist groups. The overpopulated, poverty-stricken, cotton-producing valley, home to 20 percent of the region's entire population, has been the scene of many violent incidents since 1989.<sup>11</sup>

With independence, the downstream countries have undertaken a policy of energy self-sufficiency and reduced their dependency on imported hydropower from their neighbors. Upstream countries have pursued a policy of developing and utilizing their hydropower potential which has significantly reduced the water flows to downstream countries. The urban population of upstream countries is, to a large extent, dependent on the gas and coal supply from downstream countries, especially during winter. The downstream countries thus want water for cotton and can use their energy supplies to bargain for it; the upstream countries can bargain with their water but their energy strategy requires retaining more of it.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the downstream and upstream countries face different domestic pressures. Their interests are often diametrically opposed to each other and offer little flexibility in negotiating the terms of joint use of water resources.<sup>13</sup> Uzbekistan could reduce its water needs by shifting away from cotton. However, cotton is such a big asset to generate revenue and foreign exchange that the government is unwilling to restructure its agriculture. Any fall in cotton income--which is heavily dependent on water supplies--would only further impoverish a rural population already in difficult straits.

In some ways, though, the upstream countries are even worse off. They are poorer, less powerful, and have few resources to develop. Water is one of the few assets Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan possess. Yet, if they face retaliatory cutbacks in gas supplies, their urban populations put pressure on the governments for a more flexible water

strategy. Giving up more water, however, undercuts their hydroelectric production which only makes them more vulnerable to energy blackmail from their downstream neighbors.

Given all these factors, it is not surprising that bilateral and multilateral water arrangements are constantly being renegotiated, a factor which only increases the importance, controversy and tension around this resource's distribution. As one expert summarizes the situation:

The conflict of interest over water resources between the upstream and the downstream states is now addressed in an ad hoc manner, through annual bilateral negotiations involving compensations of the upstream states, in the form of coal, natural gas or electricity supplies by the downstream states. However, the implementation of these bilateral agreements is difficult, if not impossible...<sup>14</sup>

An agreement on the joint use of water and energy resources was reached on March 17, 1998 in Bishkek between three countries--Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Three months later Tajikistan also joined the agreement. The agreement was primarily driven by the biggest consumer of water--Uzbekistan. Although Tajikistan controls a significant part of water resources, it was not invited. The situation surrounding those negotiations and the resulting agreement provides an interesting case study on these matters.

In 1997 tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan escalated, involving a military build-up by Uzbekistan across from the water reservoir located close to its border on the territory of Kyrgyzstan. This move raised concerns and anger in Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz government adopted a resolution declaring water as a tradable commodity, and codifying its right to use it for profit. It threatened to sell water to China if Uzbekistan failed to pay for it.

Not long before the negotiations started, in February 1998, Uzbekistan cut off gas supplies to both water-rich countries--Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This action also aroused anger in those two states, with the Kyrgyz government using especially strong rhetoric in denouncing it. The Uzbek side answered with similarly tough words. Apparently, aside from the water itself, the Uzbek government was also trying to make gains on territorial disputes with its neighbors.<sup>15</sup>

Threatening to use water as a weapon, Kyrgyzstan suggested that it might release so much water from its Toktogul reservoir as to destroy large cotton fields. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also announced that they would raise the production of hydropower--i.e., using more water--to reduce the need to import Uzbek gas. Tense relations marked the beginning of negotiations.<sup>16</sup>

A question of particular importance is why Tajikistan was absent from the negotiations and agreement when a significant part of water resources were under its control. Two reasons stand out: Uzbekistan believed that Tajikistan would take a tough line in the negotiating process but would comply with an agreement under pressure even if one was reached without its direct participation. But when Uzbekistan tried to implement this strategy by restricting Tajikistan's access to roads and reducing its gas supply, Tajikistan, emboldened by Russia's backing and wishing to develop its own hydropower production, reduced the flow of water to Uzbekistan during the hot season. As a result, Tajikistan was invited in the summer of 1998 to join the agreement.

It can be argued that the upstream countries have comparatively less leverage than the downstream countries. They have fewer resources and are dependent on downstream countries for their access to the world markets. Therefore, they cannot afford to build the hydroelectric stations that would make them more independent of the downstream states' energy supplies.

When upstream countries break agreements by withholding water, they derive no immediate benefit but suffer from a loss of road access and energy imports. But if downstream states argue that their water supply is insufficient and try to increase it by violating agreements, those regimes actually increase their popularity since they are seen as battling against unacceptable conditions. Moreover, the military power of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is far greater than that of their upstream neighbors, letting them make credible threats of using force if they are not satisfied by water deals.

Downstream countries also have more leverage during the winter, when their upstream neighbors are dependent on them for energy supply and roads. Upstream countries in turn, have the advantage during the hot season, when crops in their downstream neighbors require more water.

Thus, the agreement was reached when downstream countries perceived that Kyrgyzstan did indeed--as its regime had originally assumed--have the advantage over Tajikistan. Therefore, downstream countries were more flexible in their negotiations with Kyrgyzstan. They promised Kyrgyzstan financial contributions toward maintaining water facilities and the delivery of gas and coal without delay or stoppages.

Being an ally of Russia certainly gives each of the upstream countries additional leverage in negotiations and puts pressure on downstream countries. Pressure from international organizations on all countries to save the Aral Sea, in turn, gives additional leverage to downstream countries. International organizations provide financial assistance to these countries for producing alternative crops which require less water while pressuring upstream countries to discharge more water in order to ensure a sufficient level in the sea.

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, negotiations only began when downstream countries realized that

their leverages were no longer greater than those of upstream countries. The upstream countries used harsh rhetoric and the threat to use water as leverage. Growing Russian influence enabled upstream countries to "act more bravely." On the other hand, agreement is possible only when both sides can gain from an agreement. Energy supplies and access to infrastructure--leverages of downstream countries--overlapped with the use of water as a political tool and the geopolitical balance, which favor upstream countries.

However, although an agreement was reached, by the summer it had already been subverted. Before Tajikistan was invited to join the agreement, it restricted the water flow to Uzbekistan, damaging more than 100,000 hectares of cotton. This time downstream countries used high-level water diplomacy instead of rhetoric and threat; a change in the leverage of Tajikistan occurred.

As this analysis has shown, water represents a major source of conflict in Central Asia. Tensions have been especially high over the last three years as the region has experienced the worst drought in over a century. Political games, unilateral bellicose actions by downstream countries, and "retaliations" by upstream countries, have marked the foreign policies of each country involved in the conflict.

On the other hand, agreements have been reached, usually under the heavy pressure of domestic and international factors, including geo-economic and geopolitical factors. However, seasonal variations and the complex nature of domestic politics and inter-state relations regarding water then leads to the breakdown of those agreements.

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## NOTES

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