



BORDER ISSUES IN CENTRAL ASIA: CURRENT CONFLICTS, CONTROVERSIES AND COMPROMISES

Zhulduz Baizakova¹
Al Farabi Kazakh National University

Abstract:

Border issues have always been an inherent part of the Post-Soviet realities within Central Asia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia had to face numerous structural challenges including the management of the borders. Today when all five Central Asian countries are celebrating the 25th anniversary of their independence, there are significant border issues that remain unresolved and in most cases are overcomplicated. Over the years many disputed parts of the borders emerged, predominantly in the Fergana valley, where Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan territories meet, converge and in some cases clash. All three Republics found themselves with some portion of the territory whose population could not identify itself with the host nation. What was once in fact a part of a single country run from Moscow that easily handled any slight ethnic territorial, political and economic tensions, now it is under the control of three different countries with different legislation, foreign policies and approaches to border management and regulation

Keywords: Fergana valley, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Borders,

Titulo en Castellano: Cuestiones fronterizas en Asia central: conflictos, controversias y compromisos actuales

Resumen:

Las cuestiones fronterizas han sido siempre una parte inherente de las realidades postsoviéticas en Asia Central. Desde el colapso de la Unión Soviética, Asia Central tuvo que enfrentar numerosos desafíos estructurales, incluyendo la gestión de las fronteras. Hoy, cuando los cinco países de Asia Central celebran el 25 aniversario de su independencia, hay importantes cuestiones fronterizas que permanecen sin resolver y en la mayoría de los casos son demasiado complicadas. A lo largo de los años surgieron muchas controversias sobre las fronteras, predominantemente en el valle de Fergana, donde se juntan los territorios de Kirguistán, Tayikistán y Uzbekistán y en algunos casos chocan. Las tres Repúblicas se encontraron con una parte de su territorio donde la población no podía identificarse con el Estado anfitrión. Lo que fue una vez una parte de un solo país dirigido desde Moscú que manejaba fácilmente cualquier ligera tensión étnica territorial, política y económica, ahora está bajo el control de tres países diferentes con diferentes legislaciones, políticas exteriores y enfoques sobre la gestión y reglamentación fronteriza

Palabras clave: Valle de Fergana, Kirguistan, Tayiquistan, Uzbekistan, Fronteras

Copyright © UNISCI, 2017.

Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores, y no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. *The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI.*

¹ Zhulduz Baizakova, Senior Researcher at the Institute for Security and Cooperation Issues, Lecturer of the International Relations Faculty, Al Farabi Kazakh National University

E-mail: baizakova.kz@outlook.com

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/RUNI.57292>



1. Introduction

Border issues have always been inherent part of the Post-Soviet realities within Central Asia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the region of Central Asia had to face numerous structural challenges including the management of the borders. The fall of the Soviet Union came so fast and so sudden that it caught Central Asian countries off guard, unprepared and confused. Since no attempts were made to alter existing administrative borders, newly independent countries just accepted the old division. However, the borders between Central Asian republics were artificially designated dividing the territories across ethnic, cultural and religious lines. As a matter of fact, the Soviet process of drawing Central Asian borders was run hastily, and in most cases without any ethnic considerations: e.g. Uzbek inhabited areas were included into Kyrgyzstan's territory and vice-versa.

Today when all five Central Asian countries are celebrating the 25th anniversary of their independence, there are significant border issues that remain unresolved and, in most cases, are overcomplicated. Over the years many disputed parts of the borders emerged, predominantly in the Fergana valley, where Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan territories meet, converge and in some cases clash.

Central Asian states being indeed diverse in their domestic development, after the collapse of Soviet Union started gradually to drift apart from each other as the Center (Moscow) binding them with one tight knot lost its former control. As a result, nationalism had sprung replacing Soviet solidarity and mutual assistance spirit. Well-hidden and suppressed earlier various conflicts between the Central Asian republics came to light and became more prominent.

All three Republics found themselves with some portion of the territory whose population could not identify with the host nation. What was once in fact a single country run from Moscow that easily handled any slight ethnic territorial, political and economic tensions, now it is under the control of three different countries with different legislation, foreign policies and approaches to border management and regulation. As Madeleine Reeves, renowned expert on Central Asian borders wrote: "Everyday activities such as visiting relatives, burying the dead, transporting apricots, and irrigating domestic plots are often significantly harder to accomplish".²

Fergana valley is generally known for its high density of population, low social welfare and predominantly agricultural lifestyle. The other feature is that being so overpopulated there is a constant shortage of food and water supply leading to all sorts of conflict over the resources.

Fergana valley is also well known for being a potential breeding pot for Islamic radicals and terrorists as well as an ethnically unstable environment. Since the late 90s, the former Uzbek President, Islam Karimov, has been keeping strict tabs on the possible Islamist incursions into Uzbekistan from neighbouring Afghanistan while closely monitoring and ensuring necessary security measures were in place to prevent their spread into Uzbekistan. Such measures became so drastic that Tashkent even mined its border with Tajikistan resulting in many innocent deaths, mainly shepherds and illegal border crossers. The other important factor to keep in mind is the ongoing smuggling of drugs and weapons via the

² Reeves, Madeleine: *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia*, Cornell University Press, 2014, "Conclusion", pp. 241–250. (JSTOR, at www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt5hh25v.12).



porous borders of Fergana valley, which has become a normal state of affairs for many people.³

Since most of the Central Asian border conflicts are located around and within Fergana valley this article will focus in particular on border conflicts between the three countries involved: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

2. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: a struggle for borders

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have been struggling with the current status of their borders since independence in 1991. It is important to note that after 1991, Central Asian countries gradually lost the former interconnected road, rail, air, energy and water infrastructure. The ties have been weakened and the transport communication system had slowly deteriorated with no central planning and funding. Each Republic acted on its own.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, almost immediately border disputes erupted all over Central Asia, with countries trying to settle the old debts and old scores. It was agreed that each country will maintain the borders drawn by the Soviet Union in the different territories. The history of those borders however proved to be more complicated than the new leaders could begin to understand: for instance, between 1924 and 1991 Tajik Soviet leadership under the banner of brotherly solidarity with Soviet people had gradually given away/leased several mountainous areas to Kyrgyz side for pasture lands. At the same time, previously nomadic people (tribes) started to settle themselves around areas where later the state borders were established.

Due to the political Soviet planning, that regarded the region as potentially unstable in terms of its diverse ethnic population and in order to prevent the rise of any kind of strong nationalistic movements, few enclaves were created (an enclave can be defined as a territory of one state located within the territory of another state). This gave rise to all sets of problems, ranging from legal issues to water, food and energy distribution management. Free movement of people is another significant aspect to consider: all enclaves have more or less various ethnic populations with relatives separated by border lines.

Currently there are eight enclaves in Central Asia: Uzbek Shakhimardan, Dzhanay-ail, Sokh and Chong-Kra in Kyrgyzstan; Tajik Vorukh and Kairagach in Kyrgyzstan; Kyrgyz populated Barak and Tajik populated Savak in Uzbekistan.⁴ Six of them are located in Kyrgyzstan: four in Uzbekistan and two in Tajikistan.

Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek villages are thus mixed. Their populations share the same water sources, pastures, roads, energy infrastructure and other facilities. Thus, for example, Kyrgyz villagers must cross an Uzbek road to reach the nearest well.

There are many instances of open conflict erupting when one ethnic side bars the water access to the other ethnic side, and/or obstructs free movement of people to reach their pastures and grazing lands. For example, one-day Kyrgyz villagers of Kuktosh blocked the water channel for Chorkukh, a Tajik village, who in return blocked off the road leading to the

³ “Fergana Valley Five Year Humanitarian Trends Assessment, Aging Leadership, Economic Shocks, Decreased Funding and Reduced Resilience to Environmental Hazards”, Middle East, March 2017, at <http://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Fergana-Valley-Report.pdf>

⁴ Torokul Doorov: “Small Exclave Spells Big Problems For Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan”, *Radio Free Europe*, 16 January 2014, at <http://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-exclaves-vorukh-tensions/25232311.html>



Kyrgyz graveyard located in the Tajik area. There are other factors worsening the situation: poorly maintained old irrigation systems both wasteful and inefficient; steady population growth of Fergana valley straining the already limited resources; poor education and healthcare system. All these factors combined induce a great amount of tension both inside and outside the enclaves. To this we can add also environmental issues, a consequence of the ongoing climate change, like reduction of the pasture lands, contamination of rivers, severe winters and extremely hot summers

People that live in those enclaves are ethnic minorities surrounded by a territory of a different country. This situation frequently causes frictions between them and the host state on simple issues, such as access to road, school and medical facilities, trade and agriculture. It is almost impossible to try to relocate people from these enclaves who have lived there for generations, established households, cultivated lands and buried relatives in local graveyards. In Central Asian culture it will be deemed socially and culturally unacceptable to abandon the graveyards where their ancestors were buried. Furthermore, for the relocation, the countries involved would have to spend serious portions of their state budget and regulate a significant amount of other related issues. There is also a noticeable lack of political will from the authorities in trying to solve the *statu quo*: Bishkek, Dushanbe and Tashkent prefer to keep things in its current situation, rather than risking serious regional shifts. In other words, the parties are trying to preserve the *status quo*. One way of justifying such policy would be to say that so far it didn't result in any real warfare between the states.

Smaller scale conflicts occur due to the absence of clear delimitation and demarcation of the borders, which is an inherent part of the political and economic relationship between the Central Asian countries. Over the years unresolved border disputes started affecting trade links as well. For instance, in the last decade trade turnover between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan never exceeded 500 mln USD.⁵ Another factor interfering with a constructive resolution of the border conflicts is the personality and viewpoints of the countries' leaders: lack of political will coupled with little understanding of the situation on the ground contributes to the pre-existing tensions.

For instance, it is believed that Uzbek authorities have kept the archival material from Soviet times, including the maps from 1920s about the boundaries, however they refused to share it with immediate neighbours.⁶ On the other hand, Tashkent has been perceived as a bully by planting minefields across both Kyrgyz and Tajik borders, which resulted in the death of precious livestock and innocent people.⁷ However one can ask if security reasons drove Uzbekistan's leadership to take the extreme measures of mining the borders with its own neighbours. What they had in mind? For an outsider observer such behaviour reveals the deep mistrust existing in both Bishkek and Dushanbe. Even worse, this mistrust must have been developed throughout the years, if not generations, to culminate in this.

3. The Uzbek-Kyrgyz border

The Uzbek-Kyrgyz border frequently experiences small-sized armed incidents that sometimes lead to human casualties.

⁵ Trade turnover of Kyrgyzstan with Uzbekistan down by 30%, Tajikistan by 4.5%, Turkmenistan by 4.1% in 2015, Akipress.com, 7 April 2016, at <http://akipress.com/news:575334>

⁶ Hermann Kreutzmann: "The Significance of Geopolitical Issues For Development Of Mountainous Areas Of Central Asia", International Workshop, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, June 6-10, 2005

⁷ "Central Asia: Border disputes and Conflict potential", ICG Asia Report n° 33, International Crisis Group, 4 April 2002



The Uzbek and Kyrgyz border is 1378.45 km long and is still being negotiated. Only around 75% has been delimited and demarcated. As of late November 2016, both sides agreed on 56 joint areas of the border.⁸

So far, the governments have not even disclosed the exact locations and the names of another 49 disputed border territories. In the period between 22 and 31 October 2016 working groups of the governmental delegations of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan met in Batken and Osh to agree their positions on the 49 disputed border territories between the two countries signing a protocol in the end.

Few years ago, Bishkek and Tashkent agreed upon 1,095 km of the border; however no legal document was signed. Former deputy Prime-Minister of Kyrgyzstan explained this fact to Uzbeks when it was suggested, but they declined to sign an agreement. Tashkent only agreed to sign a bilateral document covering 701 km out of the 1,095 km. Lacking a Bishkek clarification on what to do with the other 394 km, no legal document was ever signed. It appears that this is another serious drawback for reaching the solution to the border conflict. On the other hand, Tashkent did offer to Bishkek some land compensation in return for land exchanges, but it was refused by Bishkek. So far there is no long-term solution to the matter.

In 2016, following the death of Uzbekistan's first President, Islam Karimov, Bishkek and Tashkent finally renewed negotiations about the border, suspended in 2010. Between mid-September until mid-November 2016 the delegations of the two countries have been regularly met on this issue. The first meeting took place on 14 September 2016 and the members of the joint special group went to investigate 23 different border areas. During the second meeting on 4 October in Andijon, the group visited another 55 disputed border spots in Jalal-Abad, Osh and Batken provinces of Kyrgyzstan. The third meeting occurred in the end of October with Uzbek businessmen, officials and farmers arriving to meet their Kyrgyz counterparts in Osh. During that meeting 49 border spots were visited. One of the last meetings happened in November, where 7 disputed border areas were negotiated.⁹ Overall Tashkent had counted that there were 56 border areas which the two countries have agreed upon. However, they are still waiting for the official delimitation and demarcation process to be completed. Still both countries have different figures concerning the number of border spots to negotiate.

Kyrgyz Prime Minister's advisor Tokon Mamytov informed that Bishkek considered that there were 58 disputed border spots with Uzbekistan left for negotiation. He also explained that the last time Kyrgyz-Uzbek border had been seriously scrutinized and discussed was during the period between 1954 and 1961. In his opinion, to complete the border regulations, the disputed parts first require to be agreed upon, to be delimited and demarcated, and later an intergovernmental agreement should be drafted, signed and ratified by the Parliaments of both countries.

Deeper issues stem from the fact that during the Soviet time, a few Kyrgyz facilities were rented to Uzbekistan, among them rich oil and gas fields in Batken province. In 2011 the Kyrgyz Parliament adopted the legislation to return the gas fields and deposits, with several

⁸ Кыргызстан и Узбекистан согласовали еще 7 спорных участков госграницы, Sputnik, 14 November 2016, at <https://ru.sputnik.kg/politics/20161114/1030260139/mid-uzbekistan-i-kyrgyzstan-soglasovali-56-spornyh-uchastkov-na-granice>

⁹ Узбекистан и Киргизия согласовали 49 участков линии госграницы, Regnum, 1 November 2016, at <https://regnum.ru/news/2200265.html>



MPs even demanding Tashkent paying back for long-term exploitation of the fields. Uzbekistan proceeded to ignore the request.

Two enclaves, Uzbek Sokh in Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyz Barak in Uzbekistan along with two important water reservoirs remain to be the most disputed parts of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border. Less than 30% of Sokh-Kyrgyz border is delimited.¹⁰ There are even cases where the house of one family member is located in Kyrgyzstan with the other family members living in Uzbekistan. Sokh, being the largest one, is perceived as an enclave for Kyrgyzstan and as an exclave for Uzbekistan. It has over 19 smaller settlements where over 60,000 people live, whose majority are ethnic Tajiks. Tashkent attempts to defend the rights of Tajik people in Sokh based on their Uzbek citizenship, and not their ethnicity which adds further complications to the dispute between the three countries.

Barak on the other hand is located 1,5 km away from Kyrgyzstan, with a population size ranging between 60,000 to 125,000 people. However due to the inflexibility of the Uzbek government they are forced to bypass and drive 300 km by road to reach Kyrgyz territory. Eventually Kyrgyz authorities made the decision to fund (3000 USD) the relocation of Barak population to Kara-Suu district of Kyrgyzstan. Another option involves free territories of Barak to be given away to Tashkent in exchange for some other land. Few Kyrgyz activists demanded to exchange Barak for Sokh enclave lands. So far Barak will remain unpopulated under Bishkek control until concrete solution would be found.¹¹

On 4 January 2016, Uzbek border guards shot a Kyrgyz civilian arguing that he crossed the border illegally to smuggle some products, a charge that Bishkek officially denied. The following day, on 5 January, Kyrgyz border guards started installing steel transmission lines, partially intruding into Uzbek territory. The event occurred in one of the Sokh villages in Batken province of Kyrgyzstan. On 6 January, Uzbek villagers angry by the installation, attacked Kyrgyz village Chaprak and took a few hostages. In response, Kyrgyz border guards completely blockaded the enclave. Tashkent blamed Bishkek for the incident and accused them of provoking the violence. After a while the hostages were released and Tashkent promised to compensate the cost of the burnt cars during the course of the incident. The enclave remained blockaded though. On 11 January appeared reports on rising food prices in Sokh, and since neighbouring Kyrgyz villages remain dependent on Sokh in terms of communication they received an impact too: energy, food and water shortages began to emerge, as well as lack of medical services, etc.¹²

Similar story happened in March 2016 when Kyrgyz border guards failed to provide to Uzbek specialists access to Orto-Tokoy water reservoir. In response Tashkent deployed two armoured vehicles, two Kamaz and over 40 armed forces around the Ungar-Too mountain (another disputed border area) and Chalasart area. Bishkek sent a diplomatic note to Tashkent protesting the measures, however no reply followed. In response, Kyrgyz side too deployed

¹⁰ "Hot border Central Asia", Center For Strategic Assessment and Forecasts, 21 May 2013, at <http://csef.ru/en/politica-i-geopolitica/326/goryachie-granicy-czentralnoj-azii-4278>

¹¹ Alisher Toksonbaev: "Barack exclave situated on the border area of Uzbekistan isto the Kara-Suu district of Osh region of Kyrgyzstan", The Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights, 29 July 2013, at http://www.kchr.org/JM2/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=299:barack-exclave-situated-on-the-border-area-of-uzbekistan-isto-the-kara-suu-district-of-osh-region-of-kyrgyzstan&catid=9&Itemid=883&lang=en

¹² Григорий Михайлов: Водный конфликт: Узбекистан выдвинул войска и бронетехнику к границе, *Central Asia Monitor*, 24 March 2016, at <https://camonitor.kz/22246-vodnyy-konflikt-uzbekistan-vydvynul-voyska-i-bronetehniku-k-granice.html>



two armoured vehicles and some military on the border, entailing a week-long standoff between the military of two countries until border guard services agreed to withdraw. In effect what happened in March 2016 was a close call and only last-minute negotiations prevented the disaster. During the same month (March 2016), tensions around Orto-Tokoy took place. Kyrgyzstan cut off the electricity transmission to Uzbek villages. Bishkek also blocked the open corridor that connected Uzbek territories to Orto-Tokoy, leaving the local population struggling for their survival, given the scarcity of food.

The Kyrgyz side claims that Uzbekistan already exploits too many Kyrgyz facilities that must be returned. Among these is the Orto-Tokoy water reservoir located 13 km from the border, which is currently being exploited by 30 Uzbek families along with a small group of security forces. Orto-Tokoy water reservoir was built during the Soviet Union and provides water to the entire Fergana valley. Its maintenance services are provided by the Uzbek specialists. In any case, Bishkek always perceived the Orto-Tokoy as an inherently Kyrgyz territory, but Tashkent also claims it.¹³

In late March 2016, Uzbek border guards placed two unofficial checkpoints and put two armoured personnel carriers around one of the disputed border areas. They justify their actions as a consequence of a heightened security alert due to seasonal holiday approaching (Nowruz). Bishkek reacted by putting its own armoured personnel carriers in opposite positions to the Uzbek ones and filed a diplomatic protest. Later, Kyrgyzstan asked for an emergency meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) Permanent Council to discuss the situation.

In the end of April 2016, Kyrgyz and Uzbek sides agreed not to use lethal force on the border against the civilians during the day. The other change was that Uzbek border guards, instead of dealing with the violators themselves, will capture and pass them over to Kyrgyz counterparts. So far, both countries have just agreed to place one official road checkpoint called Dostyk in Osh province.

One of the latest border incidents took place on 13 August 2016 when Kyrgyz police officers detained an Uzbek counterpart for illegal crossing of the border. In return Uzbekistan deployed two MI-8 helicopters with a few Interior Ministry forces in the Ungar-Too mountain demanding to release the Uzbek police officer and to remove Kyrgyz checkpoints from the Orto-Tokoy water reservoir. In response four Kyrgyz civil employees were detained by Tashkent under the pretext of illegally staying on the Uzbek territory. Kyrgyz authorities released the Uzbek police officer the same day. Furthermore, on 24 August Uzbek police officers detained four Kyrgyz radio-relay station engineers in Ungar-Too and held them until 9 September in one of the local police stations in Uzbekistan.¹⁴

On 20 September 2016, fifteen Uzbek military arrived to Ungar-Too (using the helicopter, as there is no other way to reach the area) and stayed there until 2 October 2016. They dug the trenches and made a camping in the mountain, proceeding to check the documents from the personnel of the radio relay station. Once four Kyrgyz engineers were detained by Uzbek forces in Ungar-Too, and Kyrgyz civil activists started calling to resolve the situation by force, thus appealing to the nationalistic feelings of the Kyrgyz population at

¹³ Орто-Токойское водохранилище Кыргызстан принял на свой баланс, но оно эксплуатировалось Узбекистаном, - правительство, Akipress, at <http://kg.akipress.org/news:632443>

¹⁴ www.fergananews.com/news/25177



home.¹⁵ Kyrgyz public was also outraged, asking the government to respond in kind. However, the government used diplomatic means. Was it a provocation from the Uzbek side? And if so, what were the results? The result was not complex: the two countries exchanged the relevant detainees.

One shouldn't forget the deep-seated fear existing in the minds of both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks: to avoid the Osh massacre in 2010 when, in the middle of the Kyrgyz revolution, 400 Uzbeks were killed by Kyrgyz in the southern Kyrgyzstan. Many fled to Uzbekistan in search of the rescue. At that crucial time the President, Islam Karimov, decided to avoid taking any retaliatory actions and just closed the border between the two countries. However, the resentment about 2010 events probably is still there and might trigger a rapid escalation of conflict if an unexpected turn of events takes place, such as Kyrgyz taking up arms for defending their interests during one of the probable future border incidents.

At the same time, locals living at or around the border areas are open to cooperation and eager to resolve the disputed border areas once and for all, claiming that they do not have any personal grudges against their neighbours with whom they lived side by side for generations. They blame the government for the inefficiency and inaction. Both Kyrgyz and Uzbek Governments fail to provide its people correct and updated border maps, useful to navigate their lives with and, they argue, this is where the conflict origins stem from.

The incidents presented above clearly illustrate that Tashkent obviously has an upper hand in the situation and is trying to play it skilfully. Apart from the fact that Uzbekistan has much larger and more powerful army and Special Forces than Kyrgyzstan. Tashkent has also challenged the regional leadership of Kazakhstan and will not miss an opportunity to flex its muscles. The most obvious tactic used against Kyrgyzstan was intimidation and blackmail. It won't come as a surprise if Uzbekistan will emerge as winner regarding some of the disputed border territories vis-à-vis Kyrgyzstan and its peaceful stance. Uzbek armed forces are widely perceived as the strongest in the region. They provide the country more room for diplomatic pressure and manoeuvring. Nevertheless, Tashkent is extremely cautious about overtly demonstrating its force. Today, with Islam Karimov gone, the policy towards resolving border disputes by the newly elected President, Shavkat Mirzayev, remains to be seen.

4. The Kyrgyz-Tajik border

Kyrgyz-Tajik border is one of the most complex borders in the region due to its highly mountainous terrain. Out of 978 km of the overall border, 580 km were only delimited.¹⁶ From time to time armed incidents occur involving both border guards and local population. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan keep having frequent border disputes for different reasons, starting from access to roads, migration rules and regulations, fair water distribution and smuggling.

Tajikistan insists upon delineating the borders in accordance with 1924-1927 maps, where Tajik enclave Vorukh was a part of Tajikistan. Bishkek disagrees and suggests, following 1958-1959 Soviet maps, to include Vorukh in the map as part of the Kyrgyz territory.

¹⁵ Кубанычбек Жолдошев: Власти хотят перенести телевышку с Унгар-Тоо?, Сентябрь 20, 2016, at <http://rus.azattyk.org/a/28001592.html>

¹⁶ Стрельба на границе Кыргызстана и Таджикистана. Ждать ли нового конфликта?, 3 December 2016, <http://www.stanradar.com/news/full/23151-strelba-na-granitse-kyrgyzstana-i-tadzhikistana-zhdat-li-novogo-konflikta.htm>



In 2000 the two countries established the Intergovernmental Commission on Delimitation and Demarcation issues. The commission meets regularly 3-4 times per year to discuss the border management. For 13 years the representatives of the relevant ministries, agencies, and institutions have been working to delimitate the disputed part of the state border.

In early 2000s, Kyrgyz authorities went as far as enforcing the Kyrgyz citizenship to a few ethnic Tajik families living around the disputed border areas, threatening them with deportation if they do not keep the orders. The threats also included the confiscation of the property and the land. Thus, over 800 Tajik families forcefully became Kyrgyz passport holders. Negmatullo Mirsaidov, Tajik expert on border issues, explains this fact by referring to the Bishkek's point of view on problem-solving: by enforcing certain citizenship on other ethnic and state nationals, Kyrgyzstan attempted to solve the border problem unilaterally. In other words, Bishkek is quite likely to exploit for its own benefit the fact that the territory with ethnic Tajiks holding Kyrgyz passports should rightfully belong to Kyrgyzstan. This expert even suggests that, ideally, border population should be given a choice over their citizenship on bilateral and equal grounds according to transparent procedures.

One of the heaviest fights at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border took place in August 2015 when Kyrgyz border guards opened fire in return to a supposed attack. Two Tajik citizens were wounded, and few houses damaged. Other similar incidents occurred on 6 July 2015, January 2014 (conflict over the construction of a highway) and August 2014 where in the last two cases Tajiks used mortar fire, wounding over dozen people. In the end of November 2016 shots were fired on one of the disputed border areas. In any case, both sides attempted to keep themselves at a reasonable and appropriate distance from the border line.

Since the increased armed incidents at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in the last three years, local population of the small village Samarkandyk in Kyrgyzstan is struggling to pass the checkpoint established in the aftermath of one of the incidents. Before the post was set up, Samarkandyk has been connected with two other villages in Tajikistan (Chorkukh and Shurab) and Uzbek Sokh village. Now the movement of people is restricted, and the presence of the military is more than tangible. These measures also affect negatively the trade between the two countries. Tajik merchants used to arrive to Samarkandyk to trade agricultural products and textiles for dried fruits, meat and other commodities.¹⁷ The reduced trade had also an impact on food prices at the local Samarkandyk markets, thus negatively affecting the lifestyle of the locals, heavily dependent upon the agricultural products. Some drivers are even trying to bypass the border control posts, but it means a waste of time and an increasing use of fuel. Since Samarkandyk does not have qualified medical personnel, people were used to rely upon nearest medical facilities located in Tajikistan. Again, because of the numerous checkpoints, crossing the border has become harder and longer.

In the end of 2015, Kyrgyzstan offered Dushanbe to literally swap certain border territories to receive up to 12 hectares each. Tajikistan acknowledged receiving the offer and expressed his readiness to consider it. At some point, Bishkek and Dushanbe were even discussing the physical exchange of the houses, villages and lands between Kyrgyz and Tajik populations living at the border.¹⁸ If agreed, the locals might consider changing their citizenship. However, the change of the citizenship is an extremely sensitive subject for such rural environment and a major concern for people, taking into consideration the opinion of

¹⁷ www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=9172

¹⁸ Бишкек предлагает Душанбе меняться, 29 October 2015, at <http://milli-firka.org/content/DBAHANJA/title/Бишкек-предлагает>



their relatives, friends and colleagues. However, the exchange of the territories never occurred. Negmatullo Mirsaidov suggested putting those territories under both governments' control or even to create free economic zones there, bearing in mind that border populations have always been freely trading and moving across the borders. At the same time, paradoxically, observers note that the hostilities at the borders are caused by general mistrust, lack of understanding and the absence of the good will among the neighbours to solve emerging issues peacefully. Usually the hostilities are initiated by younger generation unable and/or unwilling to attempt to compromise or negotiate. Another crucial fact to be considered is their increasing social marginalization. There is lack of adequate jobs and opportunities around the border areas. Negmatullo Mirsaidov explains that in some villages the houses of Kyrgyz and Tajik nationals are located in chess-like order, which further complicates the clear-cut borderline there.

Salamat Alamanov, who for 15 years headed the Kyrgyz governmental delegation on border delimitations, believes that another drawback in the process of border management is the frequent change of the heads of delegations and other relevant officials.

Between 2012 and 2015, roughly 78 clashes and conflicts (involving mostly border guards) occurred around the disputed border areas. Some of them involved arson, blocking of the roads and fights among the villagers.

On 27 April 2016 the population of the Tajik enclave, Vorukh, attacked the construction site of the Kyrgyz built road, Ak-Sai-Tamdyk, claiming that the road breached the enclave borders. The attackers took two Kyrgyz drivers as hostages, beaten a few road workers and broke the equipment and the two sides clashed with each other, involving over 1000 people from both sides.¹⁹

Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) that do not define or provide a clear plan of action in the case of a political-military conflict between two of its members. CSTO as a political military alliance has not done much to alleviate and/or manage the border disputes and bring the parties to the negotiation table. However, in the last few years, border conflicts decreased in number: for example, in 2014 there were 32 border incidents, and in 2015 their number was just 9, according to the press-service of the State border service.

5. Tajik-Uzbek border

In general terms, Uzbek-Tajik relations can be characterised as incredibly personalised. Apparently, the former Uzbek President, Islam Karimov, and Tajik leader, Emomali Rahmon, had a bad relationship that deeply affected the bilateral relations. Despite this fact, only 105 km out of the 1,332 km Uzbek-Tajik border, remains in dispute.²⁰

During the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had exceptional and close relations, both politically and economically. However Tajik civil war of 1992-1997 had changed the dynamics in the region drastically. Tashkent had virtually cut off Dushanbe during the period, and did not resume the ties until much later. In the aftermath of the Tajik civil war, relations

¹⁹ Марат Уралиев: Жители села в Баткенской области подрались с таджикстанцами из анклава Ворух, 27 April 2013, at http://www.vb.kg/doc/226422_jiteli_sela_v_batkenskoy_oblasti_podralis_s_tadjikistancami_iz_anklava_voryh.html

²⁰ Tajikistan, Uzbekistan discuss border delineation issues, *Asia Plus*, at <https://news.tj/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20161121/233403>.



became so bad that in the year 2000 Uzbekistan unilaterally introduced the visa regime for Tajik citizens. At the same time, Tashkent continued the process of mining the border justified for security reasons in the wake of Tashkent bombings disposed by Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in 1999-2000. When innocent people from the Tajik side started to be hurt, the relationship between the two countries seriously deteriorated.

Many Central Asian analysts considered the rapprochement between Tashkent and Dushanbe as one of the greatest achievements of 2014. Islam Karimov, President of Uzbekistan, and Emomali Rahmon, President of Tajikistan, met at the Summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Dushanbe, marking an important event. The result of the meeting has been astounding: If before September 2014, the trade turnover between the two countries barely exceeded 2 million USD, in 2015 it reached 12 million USD and for the first eight months of 2016 accounted for 41.9 million USD.

On 3 September 2016, Islam Karimov was buried. Later, in December, former Prime Minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, was elected President, becoming the second Head of State since Uzbekistan acquired the independence. Once Karimov gone, the relationship between Tashkent and Dushanbe started to progress steadily, with regular state and ministerial visits between the two countries. On 15-18 November 2016, almost one month after the Karimov's death, Tashkent hosted a working meeting between the governmental delegations of the two countries to discuss the demarcation and delimitation of the interstate borders. The mitigation of the visa rules and general facilitation of the procedures of crossing the borders at the checkpoints emerged as a first result of the constructive dialogue between Rahmon and the new Uzbek leader. Another important development was an arrangement to restore the regular air connection between Tashkent and Dushanbe in the first half of 2017, after a void period of more than 20 years. Both sides also made efforts for finishing the discussions on border delimitation and demarcation issues. However, there are few portions of the border that require regulation and management.

At the same time, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have to discuss and agree on the restoration of a railroad connection between the two countries. Since the beginning of 2012 Tashkent deconstructed the railways leading to Tajikistan's Khatlon province. Tajik side hoped that the issue could be discussed at the latest intergovernmental meeting in December 2016, but apparently this item was not put into the agenda. It appears that Uzbekistan might not yet be ready to start negotiations on repairing the railway connection. Whether the relationship between Tashkent and Dushanbe can be stable and steady remains to be seen, however nothing can be considered worse than a constant squabble between the neighbours.

6. Conclusion

Fergana valley was always known as unstable region, both politically and economically. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fergana valley was abandoned without clear demarcated state borders and thus, intra-regional cooperation was replaced by intergovernmental tensions and ethnic confrontations. Living standards are also badly affected by the presence of illegal migrants, drug trafficking and criminal activities of various sorts, including smuggling.

Russian specialist on Central Asia, Alexander Knyazev warns that bloody border clashes have a clear potential to turn into a full-scale regional or intergovernmental war. It is particularly dangerous taking into consideration the ethnic and religious controversies existing in the region. Since every Central Asian country today is making enormous efforts to promote and preserve its national identity, border clashes might also spark heavy nationalistic feelings



within the respective societies, as could be seen from the Kyrgyz reaction and opposition to Uzbek discrimination.

As history on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border negotiations illustrates, despite many years of joint work on governmental level, when it comes to cementing the results in the form of an agreement, Central Asian countries sometimes prefer not to sign. It almost appears as if the governments do not wish to proceed with the delimitation and demarcation, preferring to maintain the status quo.

Despite numerous setbacks, it appears that the death of Islam Karimov induced the opening up of Uzbekistan towards its neighbours solving some pressing issues, including the border demarcation. It remains to be seen though, how long such openness and political will of the new President Shaukat Mirziyoyev would last. With the forthcoming change of the Kyrgyz President soon during the October elections, it is possible that relations between Tashkent and Bishkek might blossom even further. On the other hand, bearing in mind how important is the role of personalities in Central Asia, if two leaders have a bad start that will surely impact upon the fluidity of bilateral relations.

Among the measures for resolving the Fergana valley border conflicts, these can be recommended:

- exchanging relevant areas of the border along with the relocation of the respective population;
- delimitating and demarcating the border using former bilateral and international treaties;
- finding a compromise using diplomatic, political, economic and other leverages.

There are few complex and persistent issues discussed in the article, concerning border management and border conflicts in the Fergana valley:

- Each side exploiting and operating different maps with different border divisions that lead to general confusion and lack of understanding;
- Little incentives to solve the border issues from the leadership's point of view;
- Low threshold of toleration of the border inhabitants, including the enclaves/exclaves, so even the smallest incidents might stir up heavy reactions;
- Administrative borders in Fergana valley being drawn along wrong ethnic and cultural lines;
- Low level of general social welfare, including poor education and poor economic well-being;
- High density of population suggests that there is bigger room for tensions and conflicts to erupt as well as less understanding;
- By having scattered enclaves within other country's territory, CA countries have henceforth unresolved territorial claims, both historical and ongoing, which in turn have certain impact upon the nationalistic considerations;
- Low wages of the border guards in all three countries contribute to tensions between them and the population.

How Central Asian states should implement their regional policies amidst this diverse ethnic landscape and what measures should be taken to avoid open confrontation and use of force?

First of all, each country should try to cooperate and compromise with its counterpart and establish a rapid conflict resolution mechanism in order to handle new emerging border crises. Secondly, the governments should shape a mutually acceptable and beneficial sets of rules



and regulations concerning distribution of the resources and free movement of people. It is only through mutually beneficial cooperation and dialogue that border issues can be resolved. CA States should also improve their economic strength and offer to the population adequate job opportunities and social welfare. And to lessen the strain on water resources, new irrigation system and technologies should be introduced and adopted to improve water efficiency. However, the creation of new jobs and the introduction of new technologies should come from the CA States not only from foreign investors. CA States themselves should start working towards achieving the prosperity and the aforementioned goals.

Bibliography

Alisher Toksonbaev: “Barack exclave situated on the border area of Uzbekistan isto the Kara-Suu district of Osh region of Kyrgyzstan”, The Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights, 29 July 2013, at

http://www.kchr.org/JM2/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=299:barack-exclave-situated-on-the-border-area-of-uzbekistan-isto-the-kara-suu-district-of-osh-region-of-kyrgyzstan&catid=9&Itemid=883&lang=en

“Central Asia: Border disputes and Conflict potential”, ICG Asia Report n° 33, International Crisis Group, 4 April 2002.

Fergana Valley Five Year Humanitarian Trends Assessment, Aging Leadership, Economic Shocks, Decreased Funding and Reduced Resilience to Environmental Hazards, Middle East, March 2017, at <http://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Ferghana-Valley-Report.pdf>

Hermann Kreutzmann: “The Significance of Geopolitical Issues for Development of Mountainous Areas of Central Asia”, International Workshop, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, June 6-10, 2005.

“Hot border Central Asia”, Center For Strategic Assessment and Forecasts, 21 May 2013, at <http://csef.ru/en/politica-i-geopolitica/326/goryachie-granicy-czentralnoj-azii-4278>

Reeves, Madeleine: *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia*, Cornell University Press, 2014, pp. 241–250.

“Tajikistan, Uzbekistan discuss border delineation issues”, *Asia Plus*, at <https://news.tj/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20161121/233403>.

Torokul Doorov: “Small Exclave Spells Big Problems For Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan”, *Radio Free Europe*, 16 January 2014, at <http://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-exclaves-vorukh-tensions/25232311.html>

Trade turnover of Kyrgyzstan with Uzbekistan down by 30%, Tajikistan by 4.5%, Turkmenistan by 4.1% in 2015, AKIPRESS.COM, 7 April 2016, at <http://akipress.com/news:575334>



Бишкек предлагает Душанбе меняться, 29 October 2015, at <http://milli-firka.org/content/DBAHANJA/title/Бишкек-предлагает>

Григорий Михайлов: Водный конфликт: Узбекистан выдвинул войска и бронетехнику к границе, Central Asia Monitor, 24 March 2016, at <https://camonitor.kz/22246-vodnyu-konflikt-uzbekistan-vydvynul-voyska-i-bronetehniku-k-granice.html>

Кубанычбек Жолдошев: ¿Власти хотят перенести телевышку с Унгар-Тоо?, Сентябрь 20, 2016, at <http://rus.azattyk.org/a/28001592.html>

Кыргызстан и Узбекистан согласовали еще 7 спорных участков госграницы, Sputnik, 14 November 2016, at <https://ru.sputnik.kg/politics/20161114/1030260139/mid-uzbekistan-i-kyrgyzstan-soglasovali-56-spornyh-uchastkov-na-granice>

Марат Уралиев: Жители села в Баткенской области подрались с таджикистанцами из анклава Ворух, 27 April 2013, at http://www.vb.kg/doc/226422_jiteli_sela_v_batkenskoy_oblasti_podralis_s_tadjikistancami_i_z_anklava_voryh.html

Орто-Токойское водохранилище Кыргызстан принял на свой баланс, но оно эксплуатировалось Узбекистаном, - правительство, Akipress, at <http://kg.akipress.org/news:632443>, www.fergananews.com/news/25177

Стрельба на границе Кыргызстана и Таджикистана. Ждать ли нового конфликта?, 3 December 2016, <http://www.stanradar.com/news/full/23151-strelba-na-granitse-kyrgyzstana-i-tadjikistana-zhdad-li-novogo-konflikta.htm>

Узбекистан и Киргизия согласовали 49 участков линии госграницы, Regnum, 1 November 2016, at <https://regnum.ru/news/2200265.html>