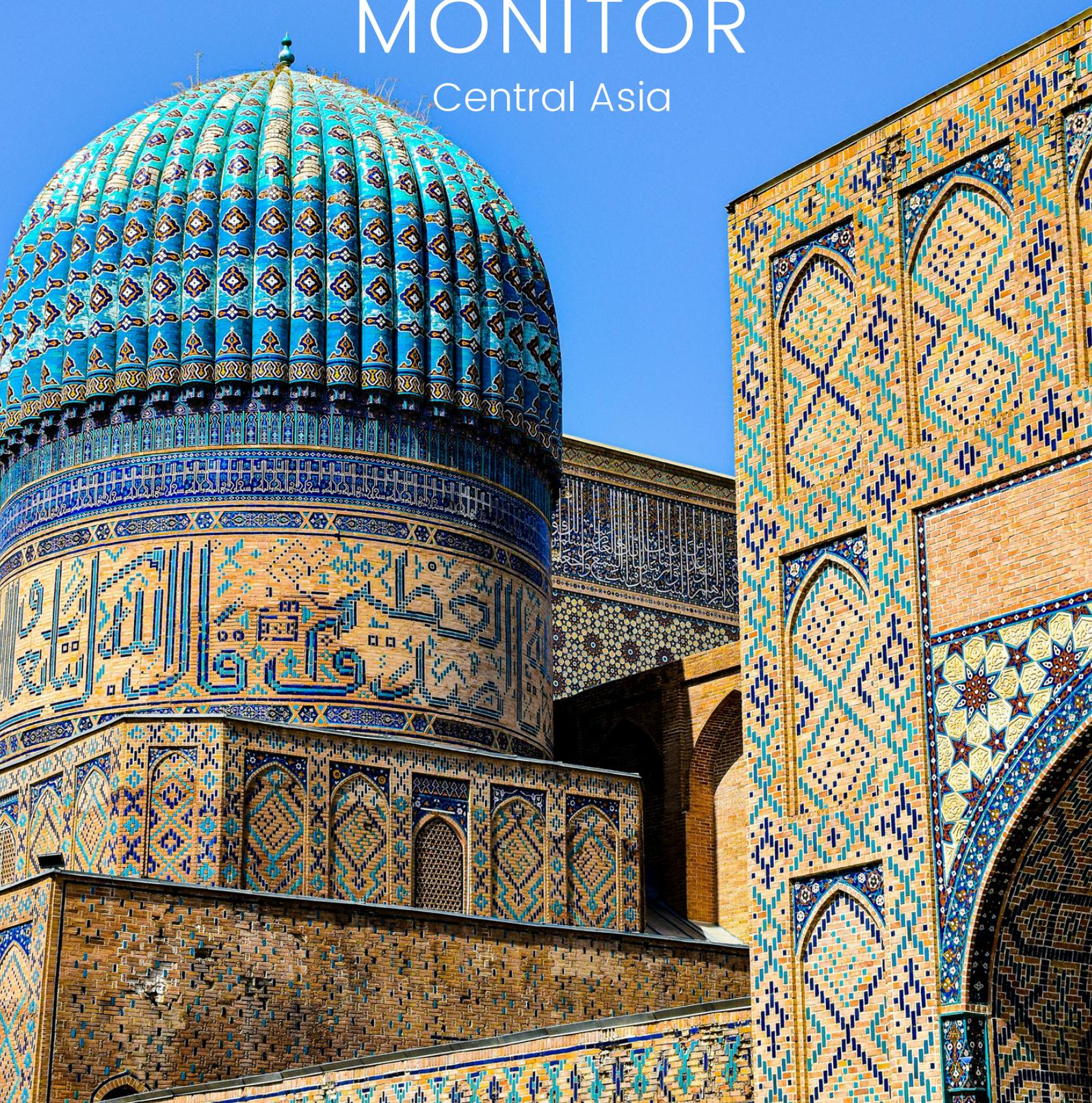


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Central Asia

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Central Asia

Issue 7

March 2024

Foreword

Events in Central Asia revolve around the environment and diplomacy, with developments around the former threatening to exacerbate existing problems if a solution is not found. The latter offers hope of greater regional peace and stability and greater relationships further afield.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban's decision to ban cultivation of the opium poppy has been a disaster, worsening an already dire humanitarian crisis. Like all problems the country faces, the international community and regional partners in Central and South Asia need to ensure Afghanistan can transition to sustainable economic practices that do not rely on illicit drugs.

Central Asia also continues to grapple through problems with water scarcity and this will only worsen as the effects of climate change worsen. It is imperative the entire region works together to mitigate its effects and continues to work towards shared schemes and agreements to ensure water is secure for the whole region.

Corruption in Tajikistan under long-term president Emomali Rahmon remains a stubborn problem and does not look like changing any time soon. The government needs to cooperate with international anti-corruption efforts and make legitimate attempts to stamp out corruption. Otherwise, Tajikistan's economic problems will not be solved.

Diplomatically, there have been two notable recent developments. Türkiye is making legitimate attempts to politically, economically and culturally involve itself in the region but faces competition from the United States, China and Central Asia's old hegemon Russia. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have also taken positive steps on their long-running border disputes, raising hopes of a final resolution that will prevent future conflict and instability.



The consequences of the Taliban's opium poppy ban in Afghanistan

Chris Fitzgerald

Key Takeaways

- Opium poppy cultivation has fallen dramatically in Afghanistan after the Taliban's ban in April 2022. Unlike previous attempts, the de facto rulers have ensured cultivation is stopped.
- The fall in cultivation will assuage the Taliban's neighbours - including those in Central and South Asia - which have borne the brunt of the illicit drug trade originating from Afghanistan.
- But the effectiveness of the ban has exacerbated the already dire economic and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan due to an economic reliance on poppy cultivation and the drug trade.
- Urgent humanitarian assistance is needed to meet the immediate needs of farmers and those facing poverty and food insecurity. This includes investment in sustainable livelihoods that disincentivise poppy cultivation.

Introduction

Last November, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that opium poppy production declined by 95 per cent in 2023.[1] The fall in production is a direct result of the Taliban's ban on poppy cultivation in April 2022.[2] At the time, the Taliban claimed the ban was because of the harmful effects of opium and that it was counter to the de facto governments interpretation of Islam.[3] Opium is a key ingredient of heroin, which Afghanistan has long cultivated and exported. This led to a

thriving illicit drug trade, which created addicts in Central and South Asia and funded war lords and extremist groups in Afghanistan.[4] This means that - at first glance - the ban looks like good news and suggests the Taliban is trying to assuage regional and global concerns about the illicit drug production in Afghanistan. But like most things in Afghanistan, it is not that simple. For years the country has been economically dependent on poppy cultivation, with thousands of Afghans earning a livelihood from either cultivation or by being involved in the drug trade.[5] The drop in cultivation has intersected with the ongoing and dire humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, which has left millions facing poverty and acute food insecurity.[6] The Taliban faces a dilemma. Banning poppy cultivation is undeniably a good thing, but it needs to be partnered with policies and investment that lessen the countries reliance on poppy cultivation. Until this occurs, the humanitarian crisis will continue and worsen.



An Afghan man works on a poppy field in Jalalabad province (Al Jazeera, 2023)

Why did the Taliban ban poppy cultivation?

Since returning to power in 2021, the vowed to end illegal drug production in Afghanistan – including opium – and in April 2022 did just that. [7] At the time, the Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah Akhuzada stated that “all Afghans are informed that from now on, cultivation of poppy has been strictly prohibited across the country.”[8]The ban includes the trade and processing of opium, not just poppy cultivation, seen as a more thorough effort to ban cultivation compared to its first attempt at a ban in 1999.[9] The Taliban rightly argues illicit drugs are bad for Afghans and Afghanistan. The alarming rise in opium cultivation under the former Islamic Republic of Afghanistan led to increased corruption, high addiction rates and provided a revenue stream for war lords and extremist groups – including the Taliban during their insurgency – which destabilised the country.[10] With ISIS-K and Al Qaeda against active in Afghanistan, the Taliban would do well to remove a revenue streams that benefits the former and destabilises the country.[11]

However, the main reason for the ban is the Taliban’s international isolation. Controlling and minimising illicit drugs has been one demand of

the international community since the Taliban took power in August 2021. The ban can also be seen as a way to improve its relationship with its closest neighbours. Iran, Pakistan, India and Central Asia have long been the closest markets for Afghan heroin, leading to thousands of cases of drug addiction and abuse. There have also been a number of reports of drug seizures at border crossings and ports, with Tajikistan reporting a 52 per cent rise in drug seizures in the first half of 2022 and Tajik authorities seizing over 2.5 tons of illicit drugs on its border with Afghanistan in 2023.[12] Rolling out the ban can be seen as an acknowledgement by the Taliban that it is seeking formal international recognition and the winding back of sanctions that have come with it.[13]

How has the ban affected Afghanistan?

Afghanistan has a long and troubled history with poppy cultivation and the illicit drugs trade. Decades of conflict and economic collapse have meant other sources of revenue for Afghans – particularly those in rural areas – is scarce. The country is also susceptible to drought, creating a lack of alternatives for farmers and making drought tolerant opium



Farmers harvest raw opium at a poppy field in the Zhari district of Kandahar province, Afghanistan (Voice of America, 2023)

poppy desirable. This has made Afghanistan a major producer of opium, providing 80 per cent of the world's supply in 2022, and a major source of heroin to Europe and Asia.[14] The trade is lucrative, with the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reporting that farmers made between USD\$425 million and \$1.4 billion in 2022.[15] After an unsuccessful attempt at banning cultivation and trafficking, the Taliban have been involved in the trade, including poppy planting and cultivation, trafficking and taxing farmers and smugglers. The United States claiming it made an estimated \$400 million between 2018 and 2019 that helped fund its insurgency.[16]

The dramatic fall in production has meant that livelihoods have been lost. Production declining from 6,200 tons in 2022 to 333 in 2023, leading to a further drop from 350–580 tons of opium to a significantly lower 24–38.[17] The UNODC reports that farmers' income from selling the 2023 opium harvest has dropped by more than 92 per cent, from an estimated \$1.36 billion in 2022 to \$110 million in 2023.[18] This has had large flow on effects. Not only has Afghanistan's rural economy lost \$1 billion in revenue, farm hands and labourers and Afghans who work in processing, trade and transport will also have been affected and have lost their livelihoods.[19]



A man unloads aid in Paktika province (Reuters, 2022)

There is where the Taliban's ban on poppy cultivation intersects with Afghanistan's ongoing humanitarian crisis. The country continues to grapple with a myriad of economic and humanitarian problems, including acute levels of poverty and food insecurity. The Office for the Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that 23.7 million Afghans require humanitarian assistance and 6.3 million remain internally displaced.[20] In November, the Executive Director of UNODC, Ghada Waly, responded to the report by stating that "Afghanistan's people need urgent humanitarian assistance to meet their most immediate needs, to absorb the shock of lost income and to save lives" and that "over the coming months, Afghanistan is in dire need of strong investment in sustainable livelihoods, to provide Afghan farmers with opportunities away from opium." [21] Many Afghans are also without employment, including women who have been banned by the Taliban from most professions. Last year, women were banned from working with domestic and international non-governmental organisations, leaving more families without a breadwinner and imperilling the distribution of humanitarian aid for many more.[22] OCHA estimates that 48 per cent of women-headed householders face poor food insecurity when compared to male-headed households.[23] While farmers likely have opium stocks from previous years, many households will face further economic and humanitarian issues – such as purchasing food and paying rent – once they are depleted.[24] This will have further and disastrous flow on effects, such as an increase in child marriages and attempts by many to flee Afghanistan into neighbouring countries.[25]

Opportunities

While the ban on poppy cultivation will negatively affect Afghanistan in the short to medium term, it does offer opportunities for the

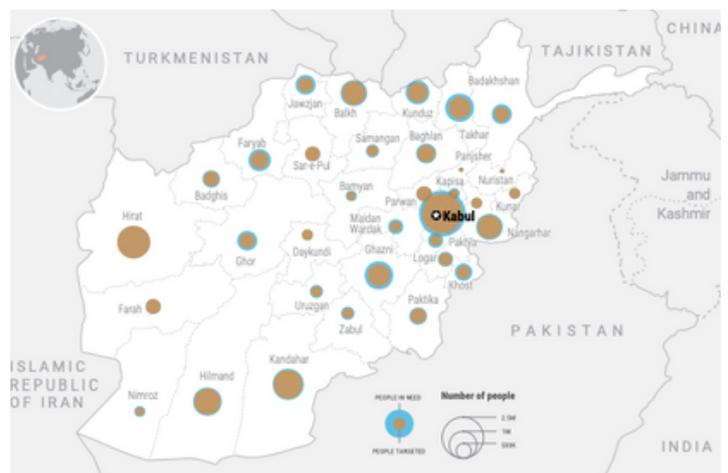
Long term. It is imperative to replace the opium poppy with other crops that can provide a living wage for farmers and their workers. There is where rural development aid is crucial, and UN agencies have a history of assisting Afghans with these projects. The UNODC needs to increase support for rural development projects, such as small-scale infrastructure and water projects, like drip irrigation systems, and investments into agricultural processing and marketing, like milk processing facilities. Initiatives to introduce new crops and livestock, like maize and chickens, would also be beneficial.[26] But these projects require funding, which is where the international community comes into play.

The international community needs to support Afghanistan in two ways, addressing the humanitarian crisis and – more specifically – providing additional support for the move away from poppy cultivation and the drug trade it supports. The problem is international funding has decreased, due to global financial issues and the conflict in Ukraine, which took the world's focus away from Afghanistan. OCHA reports that Afghanistan's humanitarian response plan was only 45.4 per cent funded in 2023, well below the 75.7 per cent managed in 2022.[27] In its Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for 2024, OCHA stated that "limited funding has and will continue to force humanitarian actors to prioritise those most vulnerable and in need".[28] This something that needs to be addressed. The international community has an opportunity to use a bad situation to move Afghanistan away from illicit drug production and distribution for the long term, improving humanitarian outcomes in the process.

Conclusion

Afghanistan has faced a myriad of problems since the return of the Taliban. Many of these are down to poor governance by the de facto rulers of Afghanistan, and the ban on poppy cultivation is no different. It is a clumsy and ill-advised attempt to exert control over the country's economy based on the Taliban's selective

interpretation of Islam. The move undoubtedly has some benefits and will assuage its neighbours who are tired of dealing with illicit drugs flowing across the border. But questions remain about whether the policy is sustainable when Afghans continue to suffer through economic and humanitarian challenges and when international donor funding is at increasingly low levels. Like most of the challenges Afghanistan has faced, significant effort is now required from the international community to ensure that mouths are fed, wages are paid, and farmers are supported after poor governance has made a bad situation worse. But it is vital the international community comes to the table, otherwise the situation in Afghanistan will continue to deteriorate.



People in Afghanistan in need by region (UNOCHA, 2023)

Recommendations

- UNODC needs to continue to work with communities in Afghanistan to encourage them to move away from illicit crop cultivation and move towards growing other, legal crops such as orchards and livestock.
- The Taliban and the UNODC need to ensure poppy cultivation is not replaced by other narcotics, such as methamphetamine, that will only serve to create another drug epidemic in Afghanistan and move farmers away from legitimate forms of business.

- There is potential for blowback from Afghans who will protest the ban once the humanitarian situation worsens further. This would be an opportunity for the international community to pressure the Taliban further on human rights, particularly that of women and girls.
- The international community needs to ensure humanitarian efforts – including assisting rural communities – are properly funded so the humanitarian crisis can be addressed so food insecurity and acute poverty can be reduced as much as possible.

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Navigating water security in Central Asia

Safer Husain

Key takeaways

- Water insecurity in Central Asia has profound effects across multiple sectors. Exacerbated by climate change, the region grapples with water scarcity, resulting in severe droughts. This affects the region's agriculture, economy, and overall stability, amplifying tensions among nations competing for limited water resources.
- Transboundary water resource governance and management are essential to regional security and stability for Central Asia. It not only ensures equitable access to water among the countries but also mitigates the risk of potential water-related conflicts, thereby fostering trust, cooperation, and peace among the nations.
- The Central Asian countries have historically prioritised national interests over regional cooperation, often neglecting international agreements on managing water resources. This lack of focus on honouring international agreements has resulted in a deficiency of effective regional cooperation mechanisms to address water scarcity and prevent water-linked conflicts.

Introduction

Water is one of the most fundamental elements essential for human survival, serving not only as a vital resource for sustainable development but also as a powerful tool for fostering cooperation. For Central Asia, water holds immense importance for overall stability. But amidst the

impact of climate change-induced water scarcity, the Central Asian countries have grappled with the challenge of ensuring water security, particularly throughout 2023.[1]



Amu Darya River in downstream countries—Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in 2023 (NASA, 2023)

The Amu Darya and Syr Darya river basins are the primary sources of water for the region; with downstream countries —Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan constantly relying on upstream countries — Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan — because of the uneven distribution of natural water resources.[2] As upstream countries have faced a 30 per cent loss of glacial mass in the last 40 years, experts have warned that Amu Darya and Syr Darya's water content will be reduced by 10-15 per cent in the next 10 years. [3] This decrease will harm the socio-economic stability of the region, as the upstream countries provide water to the downstream countries for irrigation in exchange for fossil fuels.[4]

This increases the need for water security in the region. With a focus on upstream countries, this article will highlight how inadequate water resource management and lack of cooperation has worsened water security, posing a threat to the regional stability. It emphasises the urgent need for enhanced collaboration and effective measures to address these challenges.

Legal Instruments Governing Water Security

The Almaty Agreement was signed in 1992 by the five Central Asian countries for the rational use and protection of water resources in the region. [5] This is the primary legal instrument that established an Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC) to enhance water management cooperation in the region.[6] Subsequently, in 1993, the Interstate Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) was formed which became the umbrella organisation facilitating collaborative dialogue on water and environmental issues.[7] Despite these initiatives, the IFAS has struggled due to inadequate funding and a failure to adapt its structure and legal framework to meet the evolving needs of the region.[8] Consequently, it has been ineffective in addressing grievances related to the shared resources among the member states. Due to these reasons, Kyrgyzstan decided to freeze its participation in the IFAS in 2016[9], and has not resumed it since.

The President of Kyrgyzstan, Sadyr Japarov did not attend the recent IFAS Summit held on 15 September 2023, with the country only participating as an 'observer'. [10] However, Kyrgyzstan has shown its interest in rejoining active participation, but only after a proper reformation of the IFAS.[11] Even so, Kyrgyzstan's absence from cooperative efforts, being a significant upstream nation, undermines the effectiveness of the Almaty Agreement. Efforts to encourage Kyrgyzstan's engagement and participation in these initiatives are essential for

fostering stability and sustainable development in the region.

In parallel to the Almaty Agreement, the 1996 Water Convention[12] stands as a pivotal instrument for fostering transboundary water cooperation and integrated water resources management; aligning with Target 6.5 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation.[13] However, while all the downstream countries have ratified the Convention, both the upstream countries have not yet done so.[14]



Meeting of the Council of Heads of Founding States of the IFAS in Dushanbe September 2023 without the participation of Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov. (Asia-Plus, 2023)

Their absence from the Water Convention undermines regional cooperation efforts, hindering joint management of water resources and trust-building among riparian states. This leads to increased tensions and disputes over water usage, escalating into conflicts if not addressed diplomatically. For instance, both countries experienced numerous clashes over water along their borders, including a significant incident in 2021 that resulted in the deaths of at least 50 Tajik and Kyrgyz citizens, and a larger conflict that occurred in September 2022.[15][16]

Both countries have actively engaged in efforts to promote peace along the borders in 2023.[17] However, despite so, future conflicts are highly likely with the ongoing military build-ups that escalates the frustration and pressure along their shared borders.[18] To mitigate conflict and promote cooperation, it is imperative for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to become parties to the Water Convention. By acceding to the Convention, they can commit to the principles of equitable water use, shared responsibility, and collaborative management. This would provide a structured framework for resolving disputes, facilitating dialogue, and implementing joint projects for sustainable water resource management. Additionally, adherence to the Convention would enhance the credibility of their commitments in the international community, fostering trust and confidence among neighbouring states.

The lack of strong legal frameworks regulating water processes in the region, impacting both water intake and river management, heightens the uncertainty, highlighting the need for regional collaboration.

Water Scarcity and Strained Relations

Because of climate change, water insecurity in upstream countries has exacerbated existing issues, such as droughts, in the region, affecting their relations with the downstream countries. The consequences of this can be seen in drought conditions in Kyrgyzstan, whose government has struggled to provide approximately 65 per cent of villages with clean water.[19] As a result, Kyrgyzstan's inability to share additional water resources has led to a water cutoff, significantly straining its relations with Kazakhstan.[20] This shortage has had a profound impact on both countries' irrigation systems, with the Kirov reservoir reaching a critically low capacity of only 3%.[21] Moreover, with the continued decrease in the level of the

Syr Darya since 2023, the potential for further regional conflict between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has significantly increased.[22]

Furthermore, as water insecurity increases, Central Asian countries face a new threat with the construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal in Afghanistan. The project was initiated in early 2022 and is scheduled for completion by 2028. [23] As Turkmenistan is already grappling with water scarcity, leaving the farmers with little to no water for proper irrigation, the Canal poses a significant threat to the country.[24]



Kyrgyz soldiers guard a water supply facility near the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border in southwestern Kyrgyzstan where clashes occurred in 2021. (Vladimir Voronin/AP Photo, 2021)

A hydrogeology expert from Turkmenistan stated that “This is not a problem, this is a disaster... not only because of the loss of water, there are many factors and they can all work together to sharply complicate the water situation”[25] While experts believe that Tajikistan is unlikely to be severely affected by the Canal[26], its operation will draw water from the Amu Darya, resulting in a 15 per cent reduction in water flow to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which would have a water supply and economic impact.[27]

Considering Afghanistan is neither a party to the Water Convention nor the Almaty Agreement, further cooperation must be established between Afghanistan and other nations to

address potential water-related issues that may arise due to the Qosh Tepa Canal presently and in the future. The President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev called upon the nations at the recent IFAS Summit, held in September 2023, to involve representatives of Afghanistan in regional dialogue for joint water resources use, and to study the impact of the Canal in the region.[28] Moreover, the Fifth meeting of special representatives of the Central Asian states and the European Union for Afghanistan took place on 14th February 2024 to exchange opinions on the socio-economic and humanitarian situations in Afghanistan.[29] However, more meetings and ongoing dialogue are needed to engage all stakeholders effectively and build robust cooperation frameworks. This is essential to mitigate the potential adverse effects on water availability, agricultural productivity, and economic stability in the region, especially in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.



The Kirov water reservoir in Kazakhstan's northwestern Talas region is only at 3 percent of its capacity (Radio Free Europe, 2023)

Countries have tried to address water insecurity on the national level. For example, artificial glaciers have been created to tackle water scarcity in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan,[30] and Uzbekistan has undertaken positive measures to rebuild its water management system.[31] However, inadequate and inefficient domestic measures hinder efforts to effectively tackle the

issue. In Kyrgyzstan, while the government took measures to rebuild the water management system to ensure that the citizens are provided with clean water, inefficient state policy and lack of adequate data have impeded any useful progress.[32] Tajikistan also grapples with the issue of underinvestment and lack of maintenance and operation, impacting water access in the region.[33] Furthermore, the inefficient irrigation technology employed for cotton production in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan exacerbate the strain on their already limited water resources, thereby intensifying water scarcity.[34]

The current situation requires a collaborative approach to address the issue effectively. Bulat Yesekin, an expert on climate change in Central Asia stated that “Water use policies in all Central Asian countries need to be completely revised. In Kyrgyzstan, they are increasing the construction of hydroelectric power plants, Kazakhstan is increasing the number of reservoirs, and everyone thinks that they will adapt to climate change in the future. No, by doing so we, on the contrary, worsen the situation, affect the natural processes that support life in the region and on the planet. We need to jointly decide how to survive under conditions of limited water resources and climate change.”[35]

Hopes for Renewed Cooperation

The 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) took place between 30 November to 12 December last year in Dubai. The conference saw an active participation of the five Central Asian Countries, adopting a cooperative approach of ‘Five countries – one region – one voice’ to collectively address climate change in the region.[36] Consequently, the Regional Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change in Central Asia was presented at COP28, aimed at developing cooperative mechanisms to overcome negative effect of climate change while implementing adaptation measures regionally.[37] This is a positive start to addressing the national and international

security climate change- related issues in the region.

Increased participation signifies a growing awareness and understanding of the importance of regional and international cooperation to address climate-related issues, including water insecurity. By actively contributing to discussions and initiatives at COP28, these countries are not only amplifying their voices on the global stage but also ensuring that their unique climate-related challenges receive attention and support from the international community.

Overall, the region's positive engagement in COP28 reflects a shift towards proactive climate leadership in Central Asia. It sets a promising precedent for future collaboration and underscores the region's commitment to addressing climate change as a collective challenge that requires unified action.



Bishkek neighbourhoods relying on water trucks. (Danil Usmanov/EurasiaNet, 2023)

Conclusion

Central Asia finds itself grappling with significant challenges related to water security, exacerbated by the absence of coordinated efforts to mitigate the impacts of water scarcity and foster sustainable development across the

region. Efforts to enhance cooperation and adherence to international agreements are crucial steps towards achieving equitable access to water resources and promoting stability and prosperity in Central Asia.

Moving forward, it is imperative for the region to sustain its engagement in international forums such as the COP, ensuring that their unique climate-linked challenges receive attention and support from the international community. Continued participation in such platforms will enable them to advocate for tailored solutions to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of Central Asia in the face of climate change. The common desire of all five countries to promote economic welfare and growth on the national level, will most likely also benefit future water security and planning on a regional level.

Recommendations

- Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan should ratify the Water Convention. By doing so, the countries can facilitate enhanced collaboration, and effectively implement joint projects for the equitable and efficient use of water resources.
- The Taliban should look to become a party to the Almaty Agreement to foster cooperation and understanding necessary for effective regional cooperation. Acknowledging Afghanistan has the right to utilise waters from the Amu Darya; with its inclusion into the ICWC and the IFAS, collaborative water management can be promoted, and regional partnerships can be fortified.
- Lack of infrastructure and adequate funding are barriers to the implementation of adaptation strategies needed to address water insecurity in the region.[38] There is an urgent need for financial investment to enable the implementation of water management programs, including initiatives for water conservation, efficiency improvements, and adoption of technologies.

- Civil society organisations, researchers, and activists should promote initiatives focused on advocacy and raising awareness about water scarcity, conservation, and management. It is crucial to encourage the participation of state actors in these efforts to facilitate effective consultations and collaboration between civil society and government bodies, to promote sustainable development and water security.

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A high-level problem: Corruption in Tajikistan

Marta Verano

Key takeaways

- Corruption has been a salient issue in Tajikistan for the country's entire independent history. At the elite level, power concentrated in the Rahmon family results in numerous scandals involving their circles. At a smaller scale, bribery and petty corruption are commonplace along most sectors of Tajik society.
- Although some efforts have been made to counteract corruption, there is a lack of political willingness to truly address the underlying causes of corruption in the country. Unless this changes, corruption will continue to be a problem in Tajikistan.
- Freedom in Tajikistan has diminished since 2020, negatively impacting and exacerbating corruption. As the power is concentrated in the hands of the Rahmon family, spaces for opposition are being reduced.
- Given the increasing tightening of autocratic control in Tajikistan, corruption can be expected to remain a central issue, particularly at the elite level, for the medium to long-term.

Introduction

Tajikistan continues to struggle with corruption. In 2023, Tajikistan ranked 162 out of 180 countries on Transparency International's corruption perception index.[1] The Central Asian nation received a score of 20 out of 100, where 0 means highly corrupt and 100 means very clean. It was the country's lowest score in the last decade,

bottoming out a downward trend it has followed since 2021.[2] Regionally, Tajikistan is the second most corrupt country, only in front of corruption-rife Turkmenistan. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, corruption has been a common regional issue. Lacking experience in self-government and generally unprepared to deal with the transition to a democratic system, a generalized struggle to move beyond autocracies has dominated.[3] In Tajikistan, President Emomali Rahmon has been in power since 1992, leading an authoritarian regime that severely restricts political rights and civil liberties.[4] In turn, corruption has become a rampant problem in the small nation presenting itself at many levels from the Rahmon family, to local police officers.



Tajik President Emomali Rahmon attends a meeting of the Collective Security Council of the CSTO in Dushanbe, Tajikistan September 16, 2021 (Reuters, 2021)

Grand corruption

Given the country's lack of freedom, systematic corruption is often found at the grand level, involving high-level officials and elites, who abuse their power to their own benefit and to

perpetuate their influence, starting with the president. In May 2020, Rahmon was made president-for-life in a landslide constitutional referendum that cemented his decades-long rule, raising eyebrows in the international community for its lack of transparency.[5]

The president's family and connections hold key government and business positions. Ozoda Rahmon, the president's daughter, is also his Chief of Staff. Jamollidin Nuralizoda, her husband, is deputy head of Tajikistan's National Bank.[6] Rustam Emomali, the president's eldest son is mayor of Dushanbe and speaker of the upper house of Parliament. Although these are the most notable examples, most of the President's children and relatives control important sectors of the Tajik economy.[7] Clearly, being well-connected to the Rahmon family is the easiest way to secure an influential position in Tajikistan.



The president's son-in-law, Shamsullo Sohibov, pictured in the blue suit (The Office of the President of Tajikistan, 2023)

Consequently, the Rahmon family and their acquaintances have continuously found themselves at the center of corruption scandals. In 2013, The Tajik Aluminum Company, Tajikistan's largest employer and industrial asset, was at the center of controversy. The state-run company's revenues were found to be routed to a shell company in the Virgin Islands. Unsurprisingly, President Rahmon was personally overseeing the Tajik Aluminum Company.[8] In late 2023, yet another scandal broke out as the Tajik government transferred a large amount of land to a private company controlled by one of Rahmon's brothers-in-law.[9] The judicial

system is also plagued with rampant levels of corruption, abuse of power, and arbitrary implementation of the rule of law. Bertelsmann Stiftung's 2022 report on the country showed declining levels of independence in the judiciary and separation of powers.[10]

Cronyism and nepotism are thus rampant issues in Tajikistan, which not only undermines meritocracy but also weakens institutions, reduces accountability and efficiency, and overall hinder broader development in the country as resources may be allocated towards projects or initiatives benefiting the elites rather than society as a whole.

Petty corruption

Generalised corruption is also present at a smaller scale and is part of daily interactions with state authorities. In its 2023 survey, Transparency International reported that 29 per cent of public service users had paid a bribe in the previous 12 months.[11] Corruption is also present in law enforcement, with police often asking for bribes. In the healthcare system, informal payments are often resorted to for patients wanting to receive better and faster treatment. In the education sector, corrupt admission practices to universities restrict higher education to those who can pay bribes. Acquiring documents or generally any dealing with the bureaucratic system can be expedited and made easier by paying off officials.[12]

Generally, bribery is a widespread form of currency in any relationship with state authorities, and transparency and accountability are almost nonexistent.

Anti-corruption efforts

The main international anti-corruption effort in the region is the Anti-Corruption Network for Eastern Europe and Central Asia (ACN). It was created by the OECD in 1998 around the goal of preventing and fighting against corruption in its member states. Launched in 2003, the Istanbul

Anti-Corruption Plan is the Network's flagship project.

In 2017, the ACN published its fourth review for Tajikistan and the latest to date. In it, it found that Tajikistan did not fully comply with any of the 18 recommendations evaluated in the report, out of 20 which were issued in the third round of monitoring.[13] The most lacking areas included civil society participation, Detection and investigation of complex corruption offences, access to information, and judiciary corruption, amongst others.[14] In a progress update submitted by the country to the OECD in 2018, Tajikistan lacked progress in implementing 11 out of the 19 recommendations assessed such as civil society participation, anti-corruption policy, integrity of public service, prosecution bodies, and the judiciary, or integrity in public procurement.[15]

Nationally, the government developed a 2013–2020 Anticorruption strategy, followed by a 2021–2023 strategy, which the Agency for State Financial Control and Fight Against Corruption was responsible for implementing and monitoring.[16] And yet, conflict of interest rules and codes of conduct are nonexistent, state spending is not audited and the budget is not put up for discussion in Parliament, and transparency in the procurement system is nonexistent.[17] As a result, prosecution of corruption and bribery is almost exclusively at the middle and lower levels of state administration, and specifically in the sectors of health, education and agriculture.[18]

As of February of 2024, President Emomali Rahmon has dismissed all high-ranking officials within the state's anti-corruption agency and introduced replacements, citing concerns over officials' behavior. It is not the first time that senior leadership of state agencies has been dismissed altogether and it is unlikely to provoke any real change beyond a public relations stunt. [19]

Despite the Tajik government seemingly being prone to combating corruption, the OECD reported that “there is a lack of political will and personal leadership of the heads of public bodies to meaningfully address corruption”.[20] In 2022 the United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that “although Tajikistan has a law, a strategy, and a plan of action to combat corruption, it remains pervasive in all sectors of society”.[21] As it stands, the prosecution of corruption is largely limited to low levels of public administration, as all key government positions are held by elites close to the Rahmon family, who enjoy impunity.. [22]



Officials at a conference on Tajikistan's new national anti-corruption strategy, Dushanbe, 27 October 2021 (OSCE, 2021)

A worsening issue

Despite an increasing number of measures being implemented to combat corruption, the issue has only worsened over the last two years.

The COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the far-reaching effects of corruption in the face of an emergency. In Tajikistan, authorities denied the presence of cases of the disease in the country for months, continuing to allow massive gatherings. The government only started reporting cases after a visit by WHO officials in May of 2020, when numbers had already increased exponentially.[23] The pandemic gravely undermined remittances received in the country, which represent a 50.9% of GDP.[24]

And yet, the authorities' response was nothing short of ineffective. In April of 2020, the World Bank gave Tajikistan 11.3 million dollars to establish 100 intensive care unit beds and to establish a cash transfer program for those gravely affected by the pandemic. When a cash transfer program was introduced weeks later, the government claimed it was funded through the state budget, with no mention of the World Bank. [25] It is unclear what the World Bank funds were ultimately destined for. An influx of foreign aid during the pandemic was coupled with increased crackdowns on free speech and independent media.[26] The combination of a rising number of publicly funded contracts due to the pandemic with a shrinking space for independent voices created a perfect storm for increased corruption levels.

However, the recent worsening of corruption goes way beyond COVID and onto the overall deterioration of freedom and tightening space for opposition in the country. The relationship between authoritarianism and corruption presents itself in an unwillingness from the highest political circles to make a real effort to amend the situation at the elite level, where it is truly rooted, as that would undermine the very system that awarded most of them their positions.

Over the last decade, the space for political opposition has been increasingly reduced in Tajikistan. A 2016 referendum introduced a constitutional amendment forbidding the formation of religious political parties.[27] The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) had been the country's leading opposition group until it was declared a terrorist organisation in 2015, a fate also suffered by the National Alliance of Tajikistan in 2019.[28] This constitutional amendment is one of the largest steps taken by the government in the crackdown on opposition activities, and effectively prevents the reassembly of IRTP. Activists and political opposition leaders have continued to experience pressure from the government.

Repression of civil society has also been on the rise as of late. In May of 2022, the Tajik government launched a military crackdown in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast home to the ethnocultural Palmiri group. With a well-developed civil society and nongovernmental sector, the region had seen the most social movements out of any part of the country and posed a long-standing conflict to Dushanbe. In 2022 it all came to a head with the rise of a large-scale protest movement motivated by a worsening socio-economic crisis. Dozens were killed and hundreds injured and detained in a massive military eradication effort of the region's social movement, who lost most of its leaders.[29]



A rally in Khorog, the capital of Gorno-Badakhshan November 2021 (Ozodi, 2021)

Freedom of expression and media has been no different. Despite being a constitutionally guaranteed right, the government commonly shuts down independent outlets, intimidates journalists, and blocks websites.[30] Most recently, bloggers have fallen victim to the government's repression. In 2022, two bloggers were detained and tried for cooperating with banned organisations and political parties and eventually sentenced to 7.5 and 10 years in prison, adding on to the long list of journalists detained without due process in Tajikistan.[31]

Conclusion

Corruption has been a part of daily life in Tajikistan for the country's entire independent

history. At the elite level, the Rahmon family and surrounding elites control most key positions in the country's government and enterprises. As a result, corruption scandals in these spheres are numerous. At a smaller scale, bribery and petty corruption are commonplace along most sectors of Tajik society.



Journalists Abdusattor Pirmuhammadzoda and Zavqibek Saidamini, who have been arrested on extremism-related charges (Radio Ozodi, 2023)

Although some efforts have been made to counteract corruption, there is a lack of political willingness to truly address the underlying causes of corruption in the country. However, since 2020 freedom in Tajikistan has diminished, with Rahmon's leadership being cemented in a "president-for-life" role, an increased crackdown on political opposition, diminished spaces for civil society, and the widespread repression of freedom of speech and independent media. Given the increasing tightening of autocratic control in Tajikistan, corruption can be expected to remain a central issue, particularly at the elite level.

Policy Recommendations

- Tajikistan must continue to participate in international anti-corruption efforts, submitting itself for review and adopting all recommendations that are issued.
- The efforts currently underway to sanction corruption at the lower levels of public administration must be scaled in an effort to deconstruct the bribing culture in the country.

- At the same time, persecution of lower-level corruption must be accompanied by equal, or larger efforts at the elite level. Although unlikely, given the authoritarian nature of the country, it is the only way to truly tackle the issue.
- Government-sanctioned research into the scale, modes, and consequences of corruption must be fostered in order to paint an accurate picture of the issue and how to tackle it.

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Central Asia – Türkiye relations: Politics, security culture and economics

Sabrina Lavrut

Key takeaways

- Recent high-profile visits to Central Asia, including by the president of Türkiye, underscore a strategic shift towards bolstering ties and asserting influence in the region, driven by economic interests, cultural ties and geopolitical considerations.
- Despite efforts to strengthen diplomatic relations and enhance cooperation, security challenges persist, particularly with escalating threats from ISIS-K targeting Türkiye and Central Asia, highlighting the importance of joint security measures and countering violent extremism.
- Cultural diplomacy and economic engagement play pivotal roles in Türkiye's relations with Central Asia, facilitated by shared heritage and strategic initiatives like the Organisation of Turkic States, aiming to deepen cultural ties and expand economic opportunities.
- Notable updates include Türkiye playing a pivotal diplomatic role in unifying Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to reduce border conflict; and Turkmenistan supplying natural gas to Türkiye. These developments signal Türkiye's growing role in the region.

Introduction

The relationship between Türkiye and Central Asia has recently witnessed significant developments across economic, political, and cultural domains. Notable diplomatic visits by leaders from Türkiye, as well as by counterparts from Pakistan and Iran, underscore the region's growing strategic

importance, which is seeing competition for influence regarding diplomacy, trade and infrastructure. Against this backdrop, political dynamics have intensified, such as Türkiye's growing power and Russia's waning influence, allowing the former to improve ties with the region. Shared Turkic heritage and historical ties have also played a pivotal role, offering opportunities and challenges for deeper engagement.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, right, met with Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, left, on the sidelines of the Nov. 3 summit of the Organization of Turkic States (Reuters, 4 November 2023)

Recent economic and diplomatic efforts support this improvement, including Türkiye's increasing trade volume with Central Asia, rising from USD \$8.5 billion in 2019 to 11.3 billion in 2022.[1] Last year's visit by Türkiye's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is another key indicator that Central Asia's western neighbour is looking to fill a regional breach. Whether this will result in long-term benefits in diplomacy, economics and trade remains to be seen, particularly when others, such as China, the United States and Iran are seeking to also influence the region.

This article will take a deep dive into the relationship between Türkiye and Central Asia, focusing on recent developments, to provide insights and analysis into the relationship and its implications for the region.

Politics

Last November, Central Asia witnessed a series of high-profile visits, including from Turkish president Erdoğan.[2] These visits aimed to strengthen ties, enhance cooperation, and assert influence in the region. Notably, Erdoğan's visit highlighted a concerted effort to bolster diplomatic ties and explore avenues for collaboration. Such diplomatic overtures signify Türkiye's strategic pivot towards Central Asia, driven by economic interests and geopolitical considerations. Erdoğan's activism in Central Asia is an effort to reduce Türkiye's political and economic dependency on Europe, with a desire to make Central Asia a primary domain for Turkish relations moving forward.[3] The president has sought solidarity with the region, particularly because of the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict. This saw Erdoğan criticise the West's stance on Israel at the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) summit in Uzbekistan on November 9, stating that Muslim countries are "to raise [their] voices together to defend [their] Palestinian cause".[4]

Increased cooperation between Central Asia, Türkiye and Iran was also mentioned at the ECO summit. In particular, the President of Tajikistan emphasised the need for an integrated transport and logistics system.[5] Turkmenistan's President further expressed "We prioritize cooperation in the construction of significant infrastructure facilities – roads, bridges, interchanges, terminals and others".[6] The President of Turkey agreed with them, stating "We should boost our cooperation potential in areas from transport and environment".[7] Moreover, Türkiye has been seeking to boost diplomatic ties between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, acting as a mediator over the latter's border dispute after years of sporadic conflict and violence.[8] In January

2024, Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan engaged in successful diplomacy expressing that both Central Asian countries "would hopefully resolve their border dispute in March".[9] Following the Turkish foreign minister's engagement with both countries, a resolution had been agreed in demarcating unmarked areas of their common border.[10] Fidan expressed that "this will be a significant step for security and stability in the region".[11] Presently, as a result, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have agreed on the delimitation of 90 per cent of previously contested territory signalling a hopeful end to the conflict.[12] Tajikistan's office released a statement in February 2024 expressing "political dialogue and the strengthening of an atmosphere of trust between the two countries on the basis of a centuries-old bond of friendship and on the principles of good neighbourliness".[13] Kyrgyzstan's office echoed these thoughts, expressing that bilateral relations with Tajikistan were a priority.[14]

Türkiye's diplomacy within the region has therefore proven to be successful for the region. It also signals Türkiye's growing influence, focusing on using their long-standing friendship and political and cultural ties.

Security

Despite Central Asia and Türkiye's growing relationship, there are issues. There has been an escalation recently



Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan meeting with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon (RFE/RL, 16 January 2024)

from the Afghanistan and Pakistan-based Islamic State-Khorasan (or ISIS-K) against Turkish targets, including an attack on a church in Türkiye in January 2024.[15] Ankara revealed that one of the attackers was from Tajikistan, raising concerns about Central Asian recruits to terror groups like ISIS-K.[16] ISIS-K jihadists have also targeted Türkiye through ideological assaults and anti-Türkiye propaganda. Their recent edition of the Voice of Khurasan magazine in February 2024 was titled “Call to the Turkish People: Abandon Erdogan’s Highway to Hell and Join the Century of the Islamic Hilafah”. [17] The article called on Central Asians to dismantle Erdogan’s regime and is consistent with other recent articles focused on attracting Uzbeks and Tajiks to the cause.[18] Currently, Türkiye and Central Asian states have yet to comment on the January attacks or future cooperation against ISIS-K.



Turkish police officers stand guard outside the Santa Maria church, in Istanbul, Turkey. (AP News, 28 January 2024)

These attacks are problematic for Ankara, which is seeking closer ties with the region but has seen itself vulnerable to its security problems. ISIS-K was formed in 2014 as a collective of former Taliban fighter defectors from al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Tehrik-e-Taliban in Pakistan. [19] ISIS-K, in recent years, have predominantly been recruiting from Central Asian countries through the dissemination of propaganda-fuelled articles.[20] Access to Türkiye by Central

Asians, some of whom may be extremists, has risks and this may increase with access through educational programs and visa arrangements. [21] As a result, they can infiltrate society undetected. Türkiye has been strengthening parts of their relationship through language, religion and culture and this could also be a downfall to their diplomatic relationship.

The 10th Summit of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) was held last November in Astana, Kazakhstan.[22] The OTS focuses on strengthening the “unity of brotherly countries” as described by the President of Kazakhstan.[23] President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev further expressed the importance of cooperation between Central Asia and Turkey saying, “It is imperative to ensure our collective security – Arms and drug trafficking, terrorism, extremism, migration pose increasing dangers – stronger security cooperation is vital in countering these risks”.[24] The President proposed a meeting to take place in the coming months of 2024 to sign an agreement for a collaborative effort against crime.[25] As a result, we will see increased cooperation between both Central Asia and Turkey to counter violent extremism.

As both regions navigate regional politics and diplomatic engagement, security cooperation remains paramount to fostering stability and advancing mutual interests in the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. Furthermore, Türkiye and Central Asian states must work together to solve Violent Extremism and Terrorism which affect both nations.

Culture

Culture plays a pivotal role in shaping the relationship between Türkiye and the countries of Central Asia. Historically the region has been linked through shared Turkic heritage and cultural affinities and the bond between these regions has remained resilient despite geographical distances.

The OTS has emerged as a significant player in promoting cultural collaboration between Türkiye and Central Asia. The OTS seeks to unite Europe with Asia through shared cultural heritage, emphasising the common Turkic roots that bind member states.[26] Initiatives led by the OTS, such as cultural festivals and academic exchanges, serve as conduits for cultural dialogue and mutual appreciation, enriching the fabric of Turkish–Central Asian relations.[27]

Cultural diplomacy also extends to educational exchanges and language promotion initiatives. In December 2023, The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency established Tajikistan’s first international science laboratory to enhance education in the region, signalling an enhanced cultural appeal to deepen its relations with the region[28].

One of the primary ways Türkiye has increased influence and mutual cultural understanding in the region is through religion. The Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) increased its budget in late 2023 from \$1.3 billion USD to \$3.13 billion.[29] Diyanet operates under the President of Türkiye and manages thousands of mosques domestically and internationally, such as in Central Asia.[30] Diyanet is one of Türkiye’s wealthiest government agencies and actively engages in Central Asia countries, predominantly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, to foster community between Türkiye and Central Asia amongst the Muslim population and support interfaith dialogue.[31] It also provides engagement for Central Asians to take part in educational, charitable and informational activities. Furthermore, it encourages young people in Central Asia to pursue religious studies in Türkiye through a scholarship program sponsored by Diyanet.[32] The Diyanet has submitted a budget proposal for 2024 that seeks a 300 per cent increase.[33] As the budget continues to grow, Türkiye’s presence in the region will increase, providing young people with a sense of home in Türkiye whilst expanding the influence of Islam in Central Asia.

Cultural diplomacy remains a cornerstone of Türkiye's engagement with Central Asia, offering avenues for dialogue, cooperation, and mutual enrichment. The shared heritage and cultural bonds between Türkiye and Central Asia continue to provide a strong foundation for building enduring partnerships and fostering regional stability.



Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) establishes science laboratory Dushanbe International School Tajikistan, Daily Sabah, 25 December 2023

Economy

Türkiye’s economic engagement with Central Asia has been bolstered by its participation in the OTS, which seeks to deepen economic ties and promote “comprehensive cooperation among Turkic States”.[34] The OTS’s initiatives, such as promoting trade and investment facilitation, have contributed to enhancing economic linkages between Türkiye and Central Asian republics. At this summit, the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym–Jomart Tokayev, identified investment as a key priority calling on leaders of the OTS to expand on interregional trade and investment in the economy. He expressed a particular need for green finance which would also prove to be beneficial to the environment, noting “to improve economic relations, it is necessary to establish a market for green finance [...] Kazakhstan has proposed the creation of a Council of Turkic Green Finance”.[35]

Developing new energy sources between Turkic states was also prioritised at the OTS summit. The Kazakh president stated that “we attach great importance to the development of new energy sources, the modernisation and diversification of transportation routes”. He further expressed a need for “collaborative efforts towards sustainable energy”. Following this statement at the Summit, Türkiye and Turkmenistan signed a mutual agreement in March 2024 aimed at strengthening cooperation in the natural gas sector.[36] This involves Turkmenistan committing to supply natural gas to Türkiye for transit into European markets. Turkmenistan’s President Serdar Berdimuhamedow emphasised a need to diversify their economic partnerships and take advantage of being the fourth largest natural gas reserves in the world.[37] Highlighted in an analysis by the East Asia Forum in December 2023,[38] Central Asian countries want to diversify their economic partnerships, seeking to reduce dependency on traditional partners like Russia and tap into new markets.[39] This repositioning has created opportunities for Türkiye to expand its economic footprint in the region boosting its energy portfolio. Furthermore, Turkmenistan will benefit from Türkiye’s energy infrastructure to access global markets.

However, Türkiye's economic ambitions in Central Asia are not without challenges. Competition for influence in the region has intensified, with other global players like France, the US, Pakistan, Iran and China also vying for economic opportunities.



Turkish Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar meets with Maksat Babayev, chairman of state gas company Turkmengaz, (Nikkei Asia, 2024)

[40] Security concerns are also an impediment to economic cooperation. The ISIS-K attacks in January this year underscore the security risks that could disrupt economic activities and deter foreign investment in Central Asia. Despite these challenges, there are promising signs of economic cooperation. The natural gas agreement is an example of the potential the region has when working together.

Conclusion

The evolving relationship between Central Asia and Türkiye is an increasingly important one. Sanctions against Russia after its invasion of Ukraine have allowed others to enhance their relationship with the region. With its strong cultural links to the region, Türkiye arguably is at the forefront focusing on their long-standing relationship of cultural, religious and linguistic similarities.

To ensure a closer relationship is beneficial and long-term, both parties need to work together to ensure diplomatic and economic opportunities are mutually beneficial and are focused on shared interests and goals. This includes investments and energy infrastructure and the continuation of high-profile visits and summits that allow both to discuss important issues. Security issues will continue to be a concern, but these will only be solved when Türkiye and Central Asia work together with the international community to stop Afghanistan from being a hub for Islamic extremism. Overall, the relationship is building, but there is more work to do.

Recommendations

- Central Asian countries should work to combat Islamic extremism in Afghanistan and the attraction it holds for some Tajiks and Uzbeks. This will improve regional security and make Central Asia a safer place to do business, which will result in more investment and development, including from Türkiye.

- While Türkiye is an important partner, Central Asian governments should balance their relations. The region is in demand, and this should see regional governments leverage economic and political benefits from all of Ankara, Beijing and Washington. This will improve the region's long-term economic resilience.
- Politically, Türkiye needs to show Central Asia it is interested in the long-term. This should include more high-profile visits and meaningful dialogue and decision-making at summits and forums that work towards shared goals and mutually beneficial outcomes.

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Resolved? Border tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

Ruchi Singh

Key takeaways

- Border disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have persisted since independence, leading to recurrent deadly clashes and humanitarian crises. Disputes are due to historical border demarcation issues, disagreements over territory, livestock and agricultural practices, and water scarcity, particularly in the Batken province.
- However, recent attempts at resolution have shown progress, with recent substantial strides being made by both governments, resulting in the agreement of around 90 per cent of the disputed border. Negotiations in early 2024 have further advanced hopes of peace and a final agreement on borders.
- But more still needs to be done. Both governments need to improve hydraulic structures, embrace collaborative management of shared water resources, implement cross-border projects for integration and trust-building, utilise international mediation, and continue diplomatic negotiations and conflict prevention measures.

Introduction

Border tensions between neighbours is not a new phenomenon in Central Asia and are due to persistent disagreements over historical or disputed borders and natural resources, like water. The Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan dispute stands out as particularly complex, with it stubbornly persisting for decades and often leading to violence between the armed forces of the two

countries.[1] Over the past decade, the border region has witnessed a significant surge in violence, including violent clashes in Batken province in April 2021 that resulted in 34 people killed and around 30,000 displaced.[2] September 2022 also saw violence between the Tajik and Kyrgyz armed forces along various sections of the border, extending into civilian-populated areas, killing 62 people and displacing 140,000 more.[3][4] These clashes have been a periodic reminder of the need to solve the region's border problems.[5]



Ambulance wreckage from the Isfara State Hospital attack near Chorbog, Tajikistan border, on September 16, 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2022)

But there has been recent progress, raising hopes of a peaceful resolution that prevents future conflict and increases regional stability. Last year in 2023, substantial progress was made in harmonising the disputed Tajik-Kyrgyz border with both parties agreeing on almost 100 kilometres of disputed segments of the mutual border. These efforts have intensified in the first quarter of 2024, with recent progress in border

negotiations between January and February reaching a further consensus on borders.

This article will explore the ongoing border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – including why it has remained a stubborn problem – and provide an analysis of recent attempts to solve the issue from both a Kyrgyz and Tajik perspective.

What are the reasons for the disputes?

Border demarcation issues

Historically, the region of present-day Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had porous borders, fostering interdependent relations between nomadic Kyrgyz and sedentary Tajik populations. Recent cross-border conflict traces back to 1989, escalating post-USSR dissolution due to disputes over territorial claims. Both nations relied on different historical maps, leading to contested border regions reflecting Soviet-era demarcations.[6] Over a third of the 100-kilometre boundary faces fierce disputes, escalating violence and regional insecurity.[7]

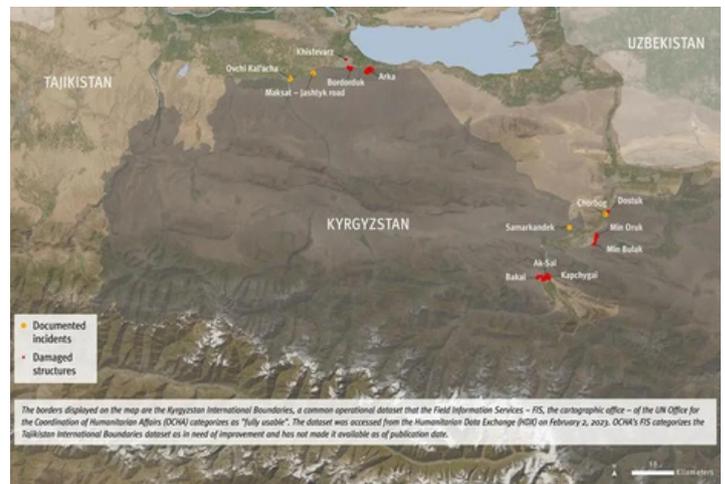
Livestock and agricultural practices

Under Soviet rule, Kyrgyz and Tajik communities were forced to abandon nomadic lifestyles, with livestock redistributed to collective farms. Tajik border regions faced grazing restrictions, relying on Kyrgyzstan's pastures due to pre-existing agreements.[8]

Following independence, Kyrgyzstan underwent significant legislative changes in pasture management. The Land Code of 1999 transferred most agricultural land to private ownership, while pastures remained state-owned. Pasture management was decentralised, with the introduction of community-based Pasture Users' Unions in 2009, aiming to ensure fair access and sustainable use of resources. Tajikistan, on the

other hand, lagged behind in pasture management legislation.[9]

The lack of clear legal frameworks and international agreements has fuelled conflicts over pasture access, particularly along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. Tajik herders, lacking sufficient pasture resources in their own territory, depend on Kyrgyz pastures for grazing. However, Kyrgyz law prohibits foreign nationals from grazing without agreements, leading to disputes and tensions between border communities.[10] These disputes, compounded by population growth and limited productivity, pose threats to regional stability and sustainable resource management.[11]



Kyrgyzstans international boundaries (Human Rights Watch, 2023)

Water scarcity

Water scarcity has fueled tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, particularly in Batken province, where agriculture dominates. Approximately 40 shared water channels often spark disputes. Border skirmishes in 2021 and 2022, centred around the Vorukh enclave's water dispute, resulted in undisclosed casualties and the evacuation of 136,000 people.[12] The Golovny water distribution station on the Isfara River was a focal point of violence in 2021, underscoring control disputes.[13]

The collapse of Soviet-era treaties and the shift to small farms worsened water scarcity, sparking conflicts between border communities.[14] Soviet policies neglected water management, worsened by post-independence budget cuts. Complex Soviet-era infrastructure needed state cooperation, but diverging interests post-Soviet Union hindered cooperation, impacting water infrastructure negatively.[15]

In April 2021, a longstanding border dispute between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan erupted into violence over access to the Isfara River, a crucial water source for agriculture in the region. The conflict escalated when both sides deployed troops and heavy artillery along the disputed border, resulting in casualties and significant damage to infrastructure. The situation became particularly tense as both countries accused each other of encroaching on their territory and diverting water from the river. Efforts to de-escalate the conflict were complicated by historical grievances and domestic pressures within each country.

The current condition of water infrastructure along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border shows a state of decay: rivers are silted up, water canals are damaged, and pumps are damaged and malfunctioning, which increases water losses.



Tajik President Emomali Rahmon hosts a meeting with Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Jeenbek Kulubayev in Dushanbe. (Tajikistan presidential administration, 2024)

The absence of dedicated institutions in charge of the rehabilitation of transboundary hydraulic infrastructure, together with the unwillingness of both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to invest in cross-border water systems, contributes to the problem.[16]

Recent attempts at border resolution

The formation and marking of borders between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are intricate tasks that necessitate diplomacy and mutually beneficial resolutions from both sides. Despite past conflicts, both countries have made significant strides in resolving their border disputes. October to December last year saw a consistent series of announcements that indicated progress on ongoing border negotiations. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have agreed upon almost 100 kilometres of disputed segments of the mutual border, including 57 kilometres agreed in October and 24 kilometres agreed upon on 29 November.[17]

In December 2023, the co-chairmen of the governmental delegations for delimitation and demarcation of the disputed segments of Tajikistan's common border with Kyrgyzstan, Saimumin Yatimov (Tajikistan) and Kamchybek Tashiyev (Kyrgyzstan), met in Batken, Kyrgyzstan. Citing the State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan, the Tajik state-run news agency Khovar reported that the parties discussed the outcomes of work carried out by the topographic and legal groups throughout the year. The co-chairs reportedly gave specific instructions to the delegations to intensify work on the delimitation and demarcation of the disputed segments of the mutual border as the most significant channel for the restoration of peace and stability in the region.[18]

In January 2024, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan agreed on an additional 38.35 kilometres of their common border after topographic working groups from both countries met again in Batken. [19]

The Chairman of the State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan, Saimumin Yatimov, stated the two countries had reached "fundamental agreements on the delimitation of disputed areas" following talks with his Kyrgyz counterpart, Kamchybek Tashiev. Tashiev expressed satisfaction with the negotiation's outcome.[20] "The resolution of the border dispute will be a significant step for the security and stability of the region," the Turkish foreign minister told reporters after his meetings with Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon and Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, in January 2024.[21]

Further progress was made in February, with Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Jeenbek Kulubayev meeting with Tajik counterpart Sirojiddin Muhriddin to discuss border delimitation and bilateral relations. They emphasized the priority of resolving the border issue and expressed readiness for a prompt and mutually beneficial solution. Negotiations resulted in the approval of 3.71 kilometres of the border, with further work ongoing.[22] "The Kyrgyz side is committed to a speedy and mutually beneficial resolution of the issue of delimitation of the Kyrgyz-Tajik state border, taking into account the interests of each party," said Kulubayev, Kyrgyz diplomat who served as the Foreign Minister of Kyrgyzstan.[23] Discussions also covered political, trade, economic, cultural, and humanitarian cooperation. Both countries reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening good-neighbourly relations and cooperation within international organisations. A cooperation programme for 2024-2026 was signed during the visit.[24] An additional 1.1 kilometres of the contested border were subsequently and mutually agreed upon on 19 February, as reported by the State Committee of National Security of Tajikistan.[25] This development emerged subsequent to a meeting held in Boston, located in the Sogd region of Tajikistan's northern territory, where respective working groups from both nations convened.[26]

Recent progress in border resolution efforts signifies a significant step towards establishing a regional order within Central Asia and promoting enduring peace and stability for both nations and the wider region. These disputes hinder cooperation in trade and transit, while also fuelling domestic political debates, threatening regional cooperation, disrupting daily life, and providing openings for external involvement. By addressing longstanding disputes, both countries can cultivate lasting peace. It would enable them to delineate their apprehensions, discern their vested interests, and envision prospective trajectories, thus fostering a pathway towards constructive engagement.



President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Zhaparov meets with President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon in Dushanbe (Kabar, 2023)

Conclusion

Diplomatic negotiations continue to represent the paramount modality for the sustained management of the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border issues, showing that diplomacy can bridge the intricacies of territorial delimitation and assist with mitigation of potential conflicts. This diplomacy engenders a structured terrain governed by established norms conducive to ad hoc communicative endeavours such as dialogic exchanges, negotiations, and the facilitation of mutually beneficial agreements. However, to achieve a lasting resolution,

a multifaceted approach is imperative, necessitating concerted efforts to address various underlying issues. Central to this endeavour is substantial investment in the restoration and reconstruction of shared infrastructure. Decades of neglect and conflict have left vital infrastructure in disrepair, exacerbating tensions and hindering socio-economic development in the region. By prioritising the rehabilitation of common infrastructure, both nations can foster mutual trust, facilitate economic prosperity, and mitigate potential triggers for future conflicts.

Recommendations

- **Joint Resource Management:** Shared management of water resources may assist with the mitigation of conflicts and the establishment of cooperation. This approach could involve establishing mechanisms for equitable sharing of water resources, such as implementing joint monitoring systems, sharing data on water availability and usage, and coordinating infrastructure development projects.[27]
- **Improve hydraulic structures:** Both countries should enhance existing hydraulic structures and water arteries to minimise losses, boost water volume, and improve distribution accuracy and transparency. Additionally, they should explore constructing new hydraulic structures and canals to alleviate strain on outdated networks, ensure efficient water allocation, and address deficiencies in the current infrastructure.
- **Cross-Border Projects:** Projects such as joint infrastructure development initiatives, collaborative trade agreements, cultural exchange programs, and shared environmental conservation efforts aimed at enhancing cross-border integration, community relations, and economic interdependency could create much-needed processes leading to trust building as well as aversion to perennial wars.

- **International Mediation:** Utilise international bodies such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation and United Nations and regional organisations like the Collective Security Treaty Organisation to support mediation processes, ensuring a level playing field in terms of dialogue.
- **Effective Border Management:** Both countries should build partnerships between national border agencies and local and international organisations on the ground. This would enable all parties to shift attitudes and behaviour and build trust and information sharing mechanisms. This includes border guards, who would be assisted with a better understanding of peaceful coexistence, constructive relations, and trust with citizens of neighbouring countries.



The aftermath of ethnic clashes in the village of Ak-Sai village in Kyrgyzstan's Batken region, in September 2022 (Radio Free Europe, 2023)

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