



CONNECTED BY WATERS: THE ISSUE OF WATER AS A FACTOR OF REGIONAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

It is well known that water scarcity is one of the most serious challenges that Central Asia is about to face in the near future. According to the World Resources Institute, Turkmenistan is among the top 17 countries that face extremely high water stress; Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are in the list of top 40 most water-stressed countries in this ranking list while Kazakhstan and Tajikistan are threatened by a medium-high rate of water stress. The challenges associated with water resources in Central Asia are expected to become more pressing with climate change and population growth from current 75.4 million to 100 million by 2050. Due to prevalent arid and semiarid hydrothermal conditions in the region, the Central Asian countries are highly dependent on water resources economically. The projections regarding the water issues in the region are so dramatic that an outbreak of armed conflicts caused by tightening of the competition for freshwater among the Central Asian countries is actually one of the plausible risks for the region.

It should be noted that most imminent water risks in Central Asia are associated with two out of five major river basins - Syr Darya and Amu Darya that are by far the most important sources of water in the region accounting for nearly 90% of the region's river water. These two main river basins together connect all five Central Asian states and are the main source of livelihood for the vast majority of the population of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Roughly, four fifths of the population of Central Asia live on Syr Darya and Amu Darya river basins. Moreover, Syr Darya and Amu Darya are the only rivers feeding the Aral Sea, which has shrunk losing nearly 80% of its volume since the 1960s because of human activity. The water issue in Central Asia is complicated by the fact that countries along the two major rivers have different access to water resources and their interests regarding the use of water from the rivers often contradict each other. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan control more than 80% of the total freshwater

used for agriculture by the downstream countries. Currently these two countries hugely underuse their hydropower capacity and have ambitious plans to increase power generation for export and internal consumption. At the same time, any change in water-course levels for countries located downstream, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, is critical because they depend very much on irrigated agriculture.

It is now clear that the water issue is a common reality that the Central Asian countries will have to live in for the next decades to come. The water challenge can also be viewed as an opportunity for a unique framework for regional cooperation in the region. The five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) could be referred to as a separate region not only based on historical, political or socio-cultural grounds but also in terms of water resources. The water challenge has also revealed that the five Central Asian countries are more interconnected with each other by water basin than with other neighboring countries.

The Central Asian region is generally known to be a fragmented region with low level of regional interstate cooperation in many areas. The countries of the region have successfully integrated into global markets after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), primarily taking advantage of mineral exports. They tend to be open to active cooperation and even integration with external major powers such as Russia, China, Turkey and the EU. However, the five Central Asian states have been remarkably sluggish in building regional cooperation schemes within themselves. These countries, except for Turkmenistan, are separately engaged in different cooperation structures. However, up to this day, there is no single regional organization encompassing all five Central Asian states. In 2019, the mutual trade among the five countries of the region amounted to \$6.1 billion, while their total trade with the rest of the world reached \$152.4 billion.

It should also be noted that the Central Asian states have largely recreated their previous mutual cooperation schemes after the collapse of the USSR, in which the mutual regional affairs were primarily regulated by external major actors, which was Moscow in case of the USSR. Intricate contradictions and conflicts of interest between the Central Asian states were preserved and managed in order to safeguard the leading role of the central power in Moscow. Approximately the same paradigm is being employed nowadays when Central Asian states eagerly respond to initiatives of Russia, for example, by joining the Eurasian integration and the Collective Security Treaty Organization; or by actively taking part in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is primarily promoted by another external actor - China. It is clear that the scale of the problem requires comprehensive cooperation and coordinated actions between the five countries. However, we can observe that Central Asian states lack initiative on launching new strictly intraregional cooperation schemes that are essentially important for addressing the water issue in the region.

This paradigm of intraregional interaction, however, does not appear to be a viable option in resolving current regional and international problems. Up until now, the Central Asian states have successfully participated in different regional organization cooperation frameworks initiated and promoted by external actors. However, as it was mentioned above, the water scarcity in the Central Asian region is an exclusively intraregional issue that does not have ad hoc solutions. The sustainable development prospects of the entire region will increasingly depend on water management in the upcoming years and the isolationist stance of one of the actors can ruin the combined efforts of the rest. Therefore, the water scarcity challenge in Central Asia requires active and comprehensive involvement of all five countries within sustainable cooperation frameworks.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Zhaparov had a meeting with the Vice President of Turkey Fuat Oktay in Bishkek. The parties discussed the results of the 10th meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation and the last Kyrgyz-Turkish business forum. The politicians noted that bilateral cooperation is deepening and for 8 months of 2021, the mutual trade showed positive dynamics. The parties agreed to increase the bilateral trade turnover to \$1 billion (Kabar, 11.09.2021).
- The President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon had a phone call with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan. President Erdogan congratulated Tajikistan with the 30th anniversary of the proclamation of independence. The leaders discussed issues of bilateral cooperation and paid special attention to the alarming trends in the development of the situation in Afghanistan. The Presidents confirmed the similarity of positions and stressed the need to create an inclusive government in the country with the participation of representatives of all ethnic groups (Asia-Plus, 10.09.2021).
- The Taliban announced a caretaker Cabinet. The spokesman of the movement Zabihullah Mujahid, when announcing the Cabinet, said the appointments were for an interim government. Uzbekistan welcomed the establishment of an interim government in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry expressed its hopes that this decision would help to achieve a broad national consensus, establish sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is ready to develop a constructive dialogue and practical interaction with the new state bodies of Afghanistan (UzReport, 08.09.2021).
- Turkey and Azerbaijan launched joint military exercises in Azerbaijan's Lachin region. The exercises were conducted in accordance with an agreement on military cooperation between the two countries. The main objectives of the exercises is to improve the interoperability of the units of the two countries' armies during combat operations and to develop the military decision-making skills among the commanders and their ability to control units (Eurasianet.org, 10.09.2021).
- The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the five Central Asian states issued a joint statement supporting efforts to create new nuclear-weapon-free zones in various regions of the world, including the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula. The document also underlines the commitment to maintaining a joint comprehensive plan of action to ensure the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program in the interests of regional and international security. The foreign ministers also declared their continued support for the activities of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in implementing the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (TASS, 08.09.2021).
- The Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Mongolia Zhalgas Adilbayev met with the Foreign Policy Adviser to the President of Mongolia Erdenetsogt Odbayar. During the meeting, the sides discussed the topic of interaction between Kazakhstan and Mongolia within the frameworks of such international organizations as the UN, CICA and IAEA. The Mongolian side proposed to expand and strengthen bilateral cooperation in the field of medical diplomacy through the exchange of research data and the development of new joint projects. The parties confirmed their disposition to further maintain and develop constructive contacts (Kazinform, 07.09.2021).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- A new railway route between Kazakhstan and China will open new opportunities for bilateral trade. The first train has already delivered 1.200 tons of cargo from China to Kazakhstan worth \$15 million. The delivered goods included fabrics, clothing, furniture and other products. After arriving in Kazakhstan, these goods will be distributed to other Central Asian countries. Previously, goods were delivered by sea to Europe, then by rail and road to Central Asia. The new route significantly reduced trade costs (Qazaq TV, 10.09.2021).
- Economic cooperation between Kazakhstan and the Russian Astrakhan region is deepening despite the pandemic. For the first half of 2021, the trade turnover amounted to \$8.2 million. Kazakh capital participates in 34 enterprises of the region. It is expected that the opening of the Consulate General of Kazakhstan in Astrakhan as well as the forthcoming Forum of Interregional Cooperation in Koshetau will boost partnership. The countries plan to develop the tourism sector using the potential of the Caspian Sea (Qazaq TV, 10.09.2021).
- Tajikistan and Uzbekistan created a joint investment company. Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev recently signed a corresponding decree. The company's initial capital will amount to \$12 million and then will be increased to \$50 million. The relevant intergovernmental agreement between both states, which was signed in June, was a basis for the establishment of the company. The Fund for Reconstruction and Development of Uzbekistan will invest 75% of funds, while Tajinvest's will contribute the remaining 25% (UzReport, 09.09.2021).
- The President of Russia Vladimir Putin had a meeting with his Belarussian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko in Moscow, where they discussed important issues such as loans and gas prices. President Putin mentioned that Russia's loans to Belarus for the period from September 2021 and until the end of 2022 would amount to about \$630-640 million. He noted that the price for Russian natural gas for 2022 would remain at the current year's level and equal \$128.5 per 1000 cubic meters (TASS, 10.09.2021).
- The Turkic Council member countries' economy ministers had a meeting in Baku, where they signed trade and economic cooperation agreements. The signed agreements envisage the exchange of information and experience in various economic spheres. The ministers noted that Turkic-speaking countries successfully cooperate in all spheres and called for further strengthening of economic ties to support national and regional economies. They also mentioned the importance of business cooperation (AzerNews, 10.09.2021).
- According to Azerbaijan's Minister of Economy Mikayil Jabbarov, the country's non-oil exports increased by 37.1% in January-August 2021. The minister noted that during the reported period non-oil exports of Azerbaijan reached almost \$1.6 billion. This rise in non-oil exports shows progress in the country's diversification. The minister announced that the country's business environment was entering a recovery period after the coronavirus pandemic. Azerbaijan plans to double the volume of non-oil exports by 2025 (AzerNews, 07.09.2021).

Society and Culture

- According to the State Committee on Statistics of Uzbekistan, the population of Uzbekistan in September 2021 reached 35 million people. This is nearly 450 thousand people more than it was in the beginning of 2021. The number of men reached 17.5 million and the number of women were 17.4 million. Uzbeks make 83.4% of the population, followed by Tajiks (4.9%), Kazakhs (2.4%), Karakalpaks (2.1%) and Russians (2.0%) (Gazeta.uz, 07.09.2021).
- According to a report published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the poverty rate in Afghanistan in the middle of next year could rise to 97% due to the contraction of GDP as a result of disruption of trade links and problems of the financial system. The situation is compounded by the termination of international assistance, drought and COVID-19. The UNDP offers a package of interventions to help improve the immediate living conditions of the most vulnerable people and communities, with a focus on protecting the rights of women and girls (Centralasia.media, 12.09.2021).
- Kazakhstan evacuated ethnic Kazakhs from Afghanistan. 35 ethnic Kazakhs, four citizens of Kazakhstan and one UN employee arrived in Almaty by special flight from Kabul. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev thanked our diplomats and employees of all departments who participated in the organization of the flight. Earlier, more than 200 UN staff and members of NGOs who worked with the organization in Afghanistan had been evacuated to Almaty on two flights from Kabul (Informburo.kz, 09.09.2021).
- The Ambassador of Turkey to Mongolia Zafer Ates met with the Governor of the capital city and Mayor of Ulaanbaatar city Dolgorsürengiin Sumyaabazar. The sides agreed to explore opportunities to cooperate in the social sector with aims to strengthen relations and cooperation between the cities of Ulaanbaatar and Ankara. Noting that Ulaanbaatar and Gaziantep are marking the 10th anniversary of the establishment of brotherly ties this year, the parties expressed their commitment to elevate bilateral relations and cooperation through the implementations of joint projects and programs (Montsame.mn, 08.09.2021).
- TURKSOY organized an exhibition for talented artists from Turkic-Speaking states in the Turkish city of Kirsehir. Artists from Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan presented their art works inspired by the historical and natural sites of the Turkish city of Kirsehir. The TURKSOY Youth Choir has also performed in Turkey as part of its tour dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the independence of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Azernews.az, 10.09.2021).
- Kyrgyzstan celebrated the Komuz Day in Bishkek. Komuz is the Kyrgyz national musical instrument made from a single piece of wood (usually apricot) and has three strings traditionally made out of gut, and often from fishing line in modern times. In honor of the celebration, a gala concert was organized in the theater square in the center of Bishkek. The orchestra of folk instruments together with the ensemble of komuzists and 150 students of the Bishkek school of art successfully performed national Kyrgyz music items (09.09.2021, Kabar.kg).