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CLIMATE CHANGE AS A POLITICAL THREAT MULTIPLIER IN CENTRAL ASIA

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KEY POINTS

- Climate change has not had dramatic repercussions on the Central Asian region, yet. The key aspect ringing a call for the region is related to water. The inaction in the sphere of water management [a key factor to sustain stability] could create triggers, which would cause water shortage, desertification, extinction of rivers and the salinization of soils and water.
- A political threat multiplier is composed of people's awareness of the causes of climate change and involvement of politicians to elevate discourse. The more people are aware of various threats, the faster they deal with them.
- However, the climate change issue is not formulated as a political one, thus authorities are very likely to see the negative consequences of climate change.
- Despite the constant discussion over water management issues the Central Asian states [Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan] fail to come up with a solution that might benefit each country. Weak law enforcement and inefficient approach to system maintenance lead to a dead-end in the discussions. States' interest is the driving force that abduces the solution.



INTRODUCTION

US President Barack Obama has recently framed climate change as a political issue.¹ While developed countries are raising alarm, should developing Central Asian countries re-examine their stance on global warming as well?

An increase in global average temperatures of 2°C would take the world into uncharted territory, with extreme weather and acceleration of the polar ice melting and the rise of sea level.² According to recent official statistics, the area experienced the rise of temperature.

In Turkmenistan the temperature has increased by 0.6-0.8°C over the past 50-70 years. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan the temperature has increased by 0.8-1.3°C over the past hundred years with increasing rates since the 1950s at 0.3°C per decade. In the small mountainous republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, temperatures have increased by 0.3-1.2°C, depending on the location of the observation site.³

The core challenge is that climate change poses a threat to overburdened states and regions, which are already fragile and conflict prone.⁴ It is important to recognize that the risks are not just of humanitar-

- 1 The White House: Briefing room. Press Conference by President Obama. December 1, 2015. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/01/press-conference-president-obama> (accessed February 7, 2016).
- 2 Connor, Steve. Climate change: Global average temperatures breakthrough 1C increase on pre-industrial levels for the first time. November 6, 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/climate-change/climate-change-global-average-temperatures-break-through-1c-increase-on-pre-industrial-levels-for-a6727361.html> (accessed December 21, 2015).
- 3 Berthiaume, Christiane, and Alex Kirby. Climate Change in Central Asia: A visual synthesis. UNFCCC, scientific papers and news reports, Belley: Zoi Environment Network, 2009. http://www.preventionweb.net/files/12033_CCCAdec2009.pdf (accessed May 25, 2016).
- 4 Council, High Representative and the European Commission to the European Parliament. "Climate Change and International Security." Europe Consilium. March 14, 2008. http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/reports/99387.pdf (accessed November 6, 2015).

ian nature. Central Asian countries turn to the UN, an organization capable of addressing risks and resolving crisis. The permanent representative of Turkmenistan to the UN, Aksoltan Ataeva, proposed to set up a climate change centre specifically for the region. The major ecological problems, which exist in this region directly or indirectly affect the overall atmosphere in the region, the standard of living and the quality of people's lives and negatively affect relations between states.⁵

The exploitation of natural resources for the sake of progress without concern to the environment has had catastrophic consequences. The drying up of the Aral Sea is one of the well-known cases. As a result, the irrigated agricultural land area is insufficient, the quality and amount of land and water resources are declining, and the reforms are too slow. Toxic waste from mining and heavy industries and deposits of radioactive waste in disaster-prone areas endanger the health of millions of people. "Extraction of hydrocarbons is booming in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Hydropower development projects are being implemented at full speed in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan."⁶ However, competition for energy sources is also straining the relations between the states of the region. The situation is difficult and will deteriorate further with a changing climate.

Central Asia is an area, where "global warming has the potential to aggravate existing tensions and security problems, by, for instance, making droughts or water shortages more likely in some areas."⁷ Water is a key target of climate change. Without proper water management system, stabilization of the soil structure, and adaptation of cropping systems Central Asia will face droughts, electricity shortages, and food scarcity.

It may be too early to think of climate change as a political threat to security in the region. However, climatic changes should be consid-

5 Centre, UN News. United Nations. October 2, 2015. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=52149#.VjhHEK4rKgQ> (accessed November 5, 2015).

6 Ibid.

7 US Department of Defense. DoD Releases Report on Security Implications of Climate Change. July 29, 2015. <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/612710> (accessed January 9, 2016).

ered as an imminent factor that multiplies all other tensions in the region. As an example, President Islam Karimov in September 2012 expressed his worries about the escalation of conflict with upstream countries. "Efforts by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to build hydroelectric power stations on rivers that flowed into Uzbekistan could spark a war."⁸ Researchers have confirmed that climate change helped spark war in Syria.⁹ Given the precedents in the recent conflicts, it is vital to address the issue through the prism of political threat.

Any phenomenon gets plausible and disquieting backing from researchers in academia. The opposing view to security endangerment caused by climate change is perceived rather as social-economic disbalance in bilateral relations of countries, like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Water is argued not to be the determinant factor in the Tajik-Uzbek strained relations, but one of the contributing catalysts.¹⁰ However, politicizing the water issue helps understand the seriousness of the link between climate change and conflict. Since researchers do not take into account the impact of the temperature rise on water flow patterns, they eliminate the threat out of the discourse.

The notion of political threat multiplier involves two stages: people's recognition of the causes of climate change and involvement of politicians to elevate discourse. Just like the economic difference among Central Asian countries, the approach is dramatically different in tackling the effects of climate change. This paper provides an analysis of preventive efforts made by leaders so far and mistakes in water projects potentially leading to conflict.

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- 8 Collado, Ramon. Water War in Central Asia: the Water Dilemma of Turkmenistan. November 30, 2015. <http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/water-war-in-central-asia-the-water-dilemma-of-turkmenistan/> (accessed December 30, 2015).
- 9 Welch, Craig. "Climate Change Helped Spark Syrian War, Study Says." National Geographic. March 2, 2015. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/03/150302-syria-war-climate-change-drought/> (accessed December 29, 2015).
- 10 Sherbadalova, Makhina. Securitizing Water in Central Asia: Security and Discourse in the Tajik-Uzbek Water Disputes. MA Thesis, Bishkek: OSCE Academy, 2015.

WATER SHORTAGE IS A MYTH

There is plenty of water for each country in the region. However, all states waste it due to ineffective management system. In 2014 Turkmenistan was among the highest per capita users of water in the world — on average, each Turkmen consumes 4 times more water than a US citizen, and 13 times more than a Chinese one.¹¹ Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan come in 4th and 5th in the ranking of the world's worst water wasters, each consuming close to 2,000 cubic meters of water per capita. Tajikistan and Kazakhstan are not far behind, ranking 7th and 11th respectively.¹² The inefficient use of water resources already leads to extinction of two main rivers, sources of water. Such irrational consumption has already dried up the Aral Sea. Given the Syrian precedent, promotion of bad irrigation techniques by the Syrian authorities led to significant devastation, drought displaced 1.5 million people within the country.¹³

THE INHERITED CROCKED SYSTEM

Until the 1990s, the water management system implemented by the Soviet Union prioritized economic development and disregarded the ecological harm. First priority was irrigation, second was hydroelectricity. In 1986-87 two Basin Water Organizations (BWOs) were established for operative water management along the Amu Darya and

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- 11 Varis, Olli. Resources: Curb Vast Water Use in Central Asia. October 1, 2014. <http://www.nature.com/news/resources-curb-vast-water-use-in-central-asia-1.16017#/waters> (accessed January 3, 2016).
 - 12 Eurasianet. Central Asian States Are World's Leading Water Wasters. October 7, 2014. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/70336> (accessed January 3, 2016).
 - 13 Plumer, Brad. A Closer Look at the Link Between Climate Change and Violence. November 15, 2015. <http://www.vox.com/2015/11/15/9738342/climate-change-conflict-terrorism> (accessed January 9, 2016).

Syr Darya rivers.¹⁴ During the existence of the Soviet Union the federal government incorporated schemes to regulate deals in various sectors of five countries, thus intertwined the system in the region. The multi-year regulation of river flow did not cause serious competition for water among the republics. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union water management brought not only economic, but also political issues. During the period of independence countries of the region have not changed the priority scheme in water management. Moreover, the quotas for water distribution remained. Since Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are major exporters of cotton, much water is spent in these two countries for irrigation. Currently, the Soviet system does not suit independent states. However, they are slow to change it at best and the situation is stalemated at worst.



UNSUCCESSFUL WATER DECISIONS

There are several reasons why the system is slow to change. The first reason is international law enforcement on the regional level. Another one is revisiting the approach of river maintenance, agreeing on quota and establishing the entity with regional priority and power. Five Central Asian states were successful to sign bilateral agreements among each other. However, there is no single document that regulates the water flow in the region taking into account the interests of all the five stakeholders. Therefore, it slows down the process of negotiations and simply abduces the solution.

While each country is focusing on benefiting their interests, they forget about trans-boundary water sources. At least five new infrastructure projects caused increase in regional tensions, where Uzbekistan is the most dissatisfied out of all states.

14 Water & Wastewater International. Rising From the USSR Ashes IWRM Across Central Asia. 2009. <http://www.waterworld.com/articles/wwi/print/volume-26/issue-2/editorial-focus/integrated-water-resources-management/rising-from-the-ussr-ashes-iwrm-across.html>(accessed January 3, 2016).

First, one of the most controversial issues is the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan, claimed to be the world's highest hydroelectric dam. It angered downstream Uzbekistan's leader of water scarcity in summer and floods in winter, when water is released for electricity production. Back in 2012 relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan deteriorated to the rail blockage and cuts in gas deliveries to Tajikistan. Uzbekistan has also "unilaterally closed most border checkpoints with both upstream countries and set mines along parts of the border with Tajikistan."¹⁵ Up until today, two countries have not agreed on any terms. Tajikistan received green light from the World Bank's assessment team, and is optimistic about the project, whereas Uzbekistan's opposition stance is firm. Uzbekistan never, and under no circumstances, will provide support to this project.¹⁶

The second issue is the Golden Age Lake project in the Karakum Desert. The synthetic lake will be about six times of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, USA. Turkmenistan has been constructing the lake since 2000 claiming it will increase agricultural production and offer a "symbol of revival of the Turkmen land", as Turkmenbashi put it.¹⁷ Water for the lake is drawn from the Amu Darya through two channels, which are going to cut across about 3,200 km of the desert. Uzbekistan does not accept that diversion and is ready to defend its water share with arms if necessary. The Turkmen side proves that the country will only benefit from the project and the first stage was already completed in 2009.¹⁸ However, the Uzbek side believes that "the lake could prove the latest man-made disaster to hit the region",¹⁹ after the Aral Sea disaster. Serious soil-salinization problems have already been monitored in Turkmenistan and relations with Uzbekistan will

15 The Economist. Dammed If They Do. September 29, 2012. <http://www.economist.com/node/21563764> (accessed January 9, 2016).

16 Putz, Catherine. Uzbekistan Still Hates the Rogun Dam Project. August 4, 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/uzbekistan-still-hates-the-rogundam-project/> (accessed January 15, 2016).

17 Ibid.

18 Turkmenistan. The Golden Age. Turkmen Lake: water conservation – a key priority of the environmental policy of Turkmenistan. January 5, 2015. http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/_eng/?id=4376 (accessed January 15, 2016). UNDP. UNDP Turkmenistan. n/a n/a, 2013.

19 IWPR staff. Turkmen Golden Lake May Prove Green Disaster. July 31, 2009. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/turkmen-golden-lake-may-prove-green-disaster> (accessed January 15, 2016).

greatly worsen if the project is completed.

The third issue is the Fergana Valley. A shared water body between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have arisen around access to shared water bodies in the Fergana Valley in the Syr Darya river basin, in the Zarafshon river basin, and in Amu Darya — most notably concerning the Nurek dam and Turkmen–Uzbek rivalries on water appropriation.²⁰ The area has not only water disputes, but also border dispute with deadly clashes. Uzbekistan uses the valley for triggering Tajikistan to stop building the Rogun dam. The governments of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan appear to have developed at least one common understanding. Despite their frequent fights over water and energy and other issues, they declared to cooperate on suppressing extremism and radicalism.

The fourth issue is the extinction of the Aral Sea since the 1960s. As a result of the inefficient use of water resources, most of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers' water is extracted for the regional states' economies. In the meantime, the Uzbek portion of the Aral Sea in Karakalpakstan continues to dry up at fast pace, despite new "Climate adaptation and mitigation programme for Aral Sea basin, which amounted to around \$44.78 million".²¹ The northern part of the sea in the Kazakh part shows progress with financial assistance of the World Bank since 2005. The Kazakhs completed an eight-mile dam on the northern sea's southern shore, creating a fully separate body of water filled with fish, fed by the Syr Darya. But the dam has cut off the southern sea, belonging to Uzbekistan, which has almost dried up.

The fifth issue is the Moscow-sponsored Kambarata hydropower dams that raise opposition from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Despite the promised financial package by Moscow, the financing of the project is currently frozen. Given the situation at present, Moscow considers the allocation of sources in the Kyrgyz project might lead to misuse of the investment. Currently, Kyrgyzstan is looking for new partners to help financing the project.

20 Ibid.

21 The World Bank. Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Program for Aral Sea Basin CAMP4ASB. November 3, 2015. <http://www.worldbank.org/projects/P151363?lang=en> (accessed January 9, 2016).

CLIMATE CHANGE GOT TO CENTRAL ASIAN WATERS

Global warming is a slower force, meaning it progresses steadily. The wake-up call for Central Asia is not dramatic, yet. It is tied to the water flows linked to the extreme occurrences in Amu Darya and Syr Darya. Changes of the so-called “triple link”²² - climate, glaciers and river in the Wakhan corridor, located in Central Asia, are advancing already causing political tensions. The latter could result in state-to-society and state-to-state relations and regional tensions over water resources.²³

Powerful Central Asian downstream states most of the time are in confrontation with upstream countries. In many configurations, partner states can be rivals and be unequal as well. Yet, there are cases of cooperation in the river basins and one can hope that there is basis for cooperation in Central Asia, as well. Climate change may promote cooperation in Central Asia because it will put pressure countries to find solutions.²⁴ Climate change and human activities may further influence the levels of the Caspian and Aral seas, which will affect the associated ecosystems, agriculture, and human health in the surrounding areas. Win-win opportunities exist offering the potential to reduce current pressures on resources and improve human welfare in the region and also offer the potential to reduce their vulnerability to adverse impacts from climate change.²⁵

22 Satke, Ryskeldi. “Interview: Climate Change in Central Asia.” *The Diplomat*. July 23, 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/interview-climate-change-in-central-asia/> (accessed December 29, 2015).

23 Maas, Achim, and Tanler, Dennis. *Regional Security Implications of Climate Change*. A Synopsis. January 2009.

24 Ibid.

25 Perelet, Renat. *Human Development Report 2007/2008*. November 2007. http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/perelet_renat.pdf (accessed January 17, 2016).



CONCLUSIONS

Is climate change politicized to attract the attention of every nation? The rhetoric is not brought to the political level in the region or within the individual countries, therefore undermines the seriousness of the social and economic outcome for the region. However, in 2015 only Turkmenistan claimed the need to establish an entity to monitor and provide an objective analysis of climate change in the region. Despite existing problems of the lack of unified system and enforcement of laws, leaders in the region are in a defensive position, waiting for climate change to bring on its fruit.

The preventive measures are widely discussed during various annual conferences in the region. However, with the existence of numerous entities regulating natural resources and water activity, it is almost impossible to reach consensus. The miscommunication among countries and the mismanagement of water system ignites the current situation, which given the climate change will only spark violence and worsen relations in the region.

Regional conflicts over water in Central Asia could create instability within the states. Uzbekistan is the heart of the entire water distribution system that has difficulty negotiating with its partners. The water distribution system allocates water between the Fergana Valley and the cotton growing regions further west. It is inefficient and it is difficult to change it. The rise of temperature, as a threat multiplier, will cause political instability in the region in the coming years, if the situation does not improve.

Environmental activists and NGOs reached a goal of raising awareness among ruling elites given the case of the Aral Sea, and broadened the discourse to political actions, such as creating various entities under UN support in the region. However, for over 20 years of independence governments cannot reach consensus on fighting climate change by means of regulating water management issues and

are busy exhausting grants from international institutions to sustain their economies and social cohesion in their countries. For the Central Asian region climate change can appear not only in the rise of temperature, which is observed today, but also in the consequences caused by poor water management. Today, the only climate change problem that should be solved within a 10-year period is water management. Climate change is a threat multiplier of all unresolved environmental issues. In fact, if this solution never comes about, the region will deal with severe consequences of instability and the security of its citizens.



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