

## Central Asia's Cold War?

### WATER AND POLITICS IN UZBEK-TAJIK RELATIONS

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At the end of 2011, Louise Arbour, head of the International Crisis Group (ICG), listed Central Asia among the top ten crisis areas in the world and a region that has the potential to see war in 2012. This turned out nearly prophetic. Within several months, the already-troubled relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan drastically deteriorated, triggering such labels as “economic blockade”, “rail war,” and “cold war.”

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are the two most densely populated Central Asian states. They border Afghanistan and serve as key transit states for the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). Both states are ruled by unaccountable autocratic regimes that have not been willing or able to discuss pressing bilateral issues—energy, transportation, border disputes, and, most importantly, the management of water resources. Tension between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan is heavily politicized and shows no sign of easing.

#### **Troubling Background**

Uzbekistan played an important role in determining the outcome of the devastating Tajik civil war in the mid-1990s. Uzbekistan, together with Russia, supported the People's Front movement that propelled Emomali Rakhmon (then Rakhmonov) into the Tajik presidency. In the late 1990s, Tajikistan openly accused Uzbekistan of supporting Colonel Makhmud Khudoyberdiyev, a rebel who had earlier challenged Rakhmon's regime. Tashkent vehemently rejected these accusations, although various news sources reported that Uzbek President Islam Karimov had supported the rebellious colonel, who ended up in Uzbekistan in 1998.

The incursion of the militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) into southern Uzbekistan through the Uzbek-Tajik border in 2000 marked the beginning of

openly unfriendly relations. Uzbekistan accused Tajikistan of an inability to control militant activity on its territory and unilaterally put land mines along the disputed border areas. Although this action was apparently aimed at stopping the IMU from entering Uzbekistan, ordinary residents of the border area and their livestock were and continue to be the main victims of the mines. In the same year, the two states introduced a visa regime, complicating the already troubled linkages between the peoples of two states.

The presence of sizeable groups of ethnic Uzbeks in Tajikistan and ethnic Tajiks in Uzbekistan remains an important hidden issue. While formally neither Dushanbe nor Tashkent have territorial claims on each other, in a scandalous interview in 2009 Tajik President Rakhmon openly stated that Tajikistan would one day return Bukhara and Samarkand,<sup>1</sup> referring to the two towns (and surrounding areas) of Uzbekistan that many in Tajikistan say represent Tajik culture and history and must be returned to Tajikistan.

The most recent escalation of relations, labeled a “rail war,” took place when Uzbekistan began stopping freight railcars going to Tajikistan. In November 2011, Uzbekistan completely shut down the Termez–Kurgan Tyube line (between the Gabala and Amuzang stations) because of a terrorist act that destroyed rails on the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan border (Termez is a main hub of the NDN). The Tajik government immediately accused Tashkent of staging a blockade of southern Tajikistan, which heavily depends on this rail route for everyday goods. According to news agencies, hundreds of rail cars with food, construction materials, gasoline, and humanitarian aid were stuck on Uzbek territory. In March-April 2012, tensions increased as Uzbekistan began dismantling the Termez–Kurgan Tyube railroad instead of repairing it. Furthermore, in early April 2012, Uzbekistan, at short notice, suspended supplies of natural gas to Tajikistan, referring to the “completion of contract obligations” and the need to provide gas to China. Tajikistan, with heavy energy and transport dependence on Uzbekistan, accused the latter of implementing an “undeclared and permanent economic blockade” of Tajikistan aimed at triggering social unrest in Tajikistan. Tashkent ruled out such interpretations, saying that its actions had been well-grounded and adequate.

### **Rogun: The Problem**

While rail and energy trade and the tensions over them are hugely important, observers suggest that these are just tools in the two states’ main conflict over the region’s water resources. While over 75 percent of the Amu Darya, the region’s key water artery, is formed on the territory of Tajikistan, the downstream states, most prominently Uzbekistan, are the main consumers of water for irrigation purposes. Hydropower is seen as the only type of energy that Tajikistan can produce, as it lacks any major sources of gas and oil. In the early 2000s, Tajikistan began active efforts to build several new

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<sup>1</sup> Arkadyi Dubnov. “My voz’ mem Samarkand i Buharu,” *Vremya Novostei*, Issue 228, Dec 10, 2009. Available at <http://www.vremya.ru/2009/228/5/243519.html>.

hydropower stations on the basis of Soviet-era construction plans on the Vaksh, Panj, and other rivers that jointly form the Amu Darya. However, the construction of hydropower plants requires gigantic dams, which has been a key concern for Uzbekistan.

Today, the construction of the Rogun hydropower plant on the Vaksh river is the main agenda item for Tajik President Rakhmon. If and when completed, this plant will become one of the largest and most powerful in Central Asia, annually generating over 13 billion kilowatts per hour. More importantly for Uzbekistan, the Rogun dam will become the highest (335 meters) in the world and store over 14 billion cubic meters of water.



The Uzbek authorities have long loudly argued against the construction of large-scale hydropower facilities by upstream neighbors. They cite possible devastation due to an earthquake and a ruptured reservoir. Furthermore, according to Uzbekistan's government newspaper *Pravda Vostoka*, filling the Rogun reservoir would require a "drastic reduction" of water flow for at least 8-10 years, which would cost Uzbekistan at least \$20 billion.

Tajikistan stresses that its energy demands can only be sustainably met through hydropower. Many observers refer to the precedent of the country's Soviet-built Nurek hydropower plant, of comparable size to Rogun, as a facility that generates electricity for the upstream state while providing downstream states the opportunity to limit water flow in the winter and increase it in the summer (when water is most needed for irrigation).

Technicalities aside, sources in Tashkent and Dushanbe suggest that the gigantic Rogun facility is a political tool: Dushanbe is desperately searching for leverage against Uzbekistan, which controls nearly all transportation and energy grids that connect to Tajikistan, while Tashkent is unwilling to accept any increase of Tajik leverage in releasing water downstream.

### **Domineering Presidents**

As the above suggests, the key water issues in dispute are technical. In principle, they could be discussed and negotiated by both states' relevant agencies. However, because of the deep distrust between Karimov and Rakhmon and the politicization of the issue domestically, it is hard to imagine the two states settling the issue bilaterally.

Rakhmon has claimed that Tajikistan has "no alternative to completing the construction of Rogun and other hydroelectric facilities" and that the construction of Rogun is "a question of life or death" for Tajikistan. Moreover, Rakhmon has not been willing to consider any revisions to the facility's technical parameters (for instance, its height). In 2007, the Tajik government annulled its agreement with the Russian company Rusal that was performing construction work on Rogun, claiming that Rusal was lobbying for the interests of Uzbekistan when it suggested decreasing the size of the

dam. In May 2012, a member of the European parliament, Nicole Kiil-Nielsen, while sympathizing with Tajikistan's concerns over the energy deficit, suggested that it was necessary to avoid "megalomania" while planning the size of the Rogun facility, a statement that triggered criticism from her Tajik counterparts.

Uzbek President Karimov appears similarly committed to his plans not to allow the construction of Rogun. In October 2011, during his visit to rural areas of Uzbekistan, Karimov questioned, or rather claimed, "How can we allow for the people of Uzbekistan to live eight years without water until the Rogun dam gets filled?" Furthermore, he claimed that Uzbekistan's irrigated land area would go from the current 4.3 million hectares to 10 million if there were no problems with upstream water flow. The Uzbek president never fails to mention the dying Aral Sea as another factor supporting his anti-Rogun position.

As the Tajik service of Radio Liberty and others have observed, both presidents have turned Rogun into a national slogan, which further deteriorates the relationship. While Rogun remains on top of the agenda, the two countries have many other water-related disputes, including control over the Soviet-built Farkhad dam in northern Tajikistan and the construction of other Tajik dams. There are no indications that the two sides are ready to compromise on any of these issues. Instead, one can observe regular rounds of rhetorical clashes, followed by actions like the railroad and energy blockades. The situation became even more tense in April 2012, when local media reported a concentration of Uzbek tanks and armored vehicles at the Uzbek-Tajik border. Similar reports were made by Tajik authorities in mid-December 2011.

For now, Tashkent and Dushanbe have agreed to receive an international assessment of the technical and environmental implications of Rogun before construction resumes. The assessment study, supported by the World Bank, has been ongoing since 2010 and final results are expected in early 2013, according to Tajik Foreign Minister Zarifi. However, in the context of the ongoing political rhetoric of the two domineering presidents, it is hard to imagine the two states agreeing to any conclusions or recommendations the study puts forward.

## **Conclusion**

Tajik-Uzbek tensions are fueled and maintained by the poor personal relations between Karimov and Rakhmon. Both have used Rogun as an issue in their own national political narratives, which will be very hard for either of them to revise or reverse. Because they show no propensity for serious negotiations, the most likely outcome is a further toughening of Uzbek pressure on Tajikistan. In addition to railroads and natural gas, and the ability to easily cut off Tajikistan from the Central Asian electricity grid, Uzbekistan has strong control over Tajikistan's main highways to the north—to Kazakhstan, Russia, and beyond.

The blockade and any responses to it will severely hit both the population of Tajikistan, which has already been living through hard socioeconomic realities, and that of bordering areas of Uzbekistan. While it remains to be seen whether the blockade will eventually make the Tajik regime more pliable, the latter will likely at least ascribe any

further power cuts, fairly or not, to Uzbekistan. Further increases in Uzbek pressure will also force Tajikistan to actively seek alternative solutions to its transportation and energy needs, which will not necessarily help Tashkent and Dushanbe resolve their existing disputes. Close international attention and active mediation are needed to help the two sides find a compromise and reduce the sufferings of their populations, especially given that the ingredients and solutions to their transborder conflicts are very much present in other bilateral relations across Central Asia.

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