

Central Asia's Borders

THE NEXT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 492

November 2017

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Central Asia's states have been managing (or mismanaging, as some observers [argue](#)) their borders for a quarter century. During this time, they have received substantial sums from international donors to improve their border and customs authorities to foster boundaries that are both open and secure—open to lucrative trade and ties that spur regional development but closed to transnational threats.

This memo shifts focus away from questions about whether this aid was squandered or put to good use; instead, it looks to the future and gives international policymakers and the donor community rules of thumb to follow if they are to make better use of ever-smaller sums of development and security assistance. These rules of thumb include avoiding the false mantras that characterize border control—like building bridges rather than walls—and recognizing that local populations may prefer closed borders in some cases. These rules also highlight the need to make trade-offs in border aid to overhaul tasks that matter most in border management. Most importantly, donors and policymakers must meaningfully engage local populations to understand why Central Asia's untroubled border regions far outnumber the conflict prone areas. Mapping the untroubled spots may be the key to better border management assistance with far less money in the next twenty-five years.

What We Have Learned So Far

Central Asian states have now been independent for just over a quarter century—a span of time that offers valuable lessons. First, predictions about the fragility of borders have generally been wrong. The violent re-bordering that some experts predicted would follow independence never took place, despite episodes of conflict across ethnic lines in border regions. Borders have been exceptionally stable in the region in terms of fixity;

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that is, rulers and local populations have, at best, mutually recognized boundaries, at worst, worked to evade them without questioning their overall legitimacy on maps. This is the case for the Fergana Valley (straddling Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), which observers routinely describe as the region's powder keg, and the enclaves and exclaves in that region, which were expected to bring states like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to the brink of war.

Second, despite being newly independent, states learned how to manage their borders fairly quickly. This is not to say that Central Asian authorities performed the complex portfolio of border functions well. Instead, rulers [simplified](#) the task at hand and deployed border control strategies to shore up revenue and protect their favored path to state building. In Uzbekistan, border control was designed to protect the autarchic economy and to prevent goods and products whose prices were set artificially low by state authorities—like cotton and gas—from being smuggled across borders to more lucrative markets; in adjacent Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, state officials favored an open-borders policy intended to offset tariff losses with much greater trade volumes that would boost the economy. Security measures often took a back seat to economic functions at borders in this early, post-independence period. The first disputes on record between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, moreover, were not over the location of the border but over the two states conflicting policies of border control.

Third, international aid poured in with lots of players offering Central Asian states a semi-coordinated border makeover. From the mid-1990s to the present, donors spent hundreds of millions across the region; partly on training and equipping, mostly on infrastructure like barracks for guards, crossing terminals cross-border bridges, and roadways to international crossings. The border management assistance left behind an impressive infrastructure whose impact should not be discounted. [Thanks to these initiatives](#), border authorities have better skills, hold higher standards, and enjoy access to proper facilities in doing their work.

Yet, donors failed to grasp what drove border control strategies in each state. Early aid programs diagnosed the problem as one of capacity, corruption, and culture; they believed that Central Asia's rulers and their nascent border police and customs services did not have the manpower, professionalism, and modern know-how that good border control required. Central Asian authorities were thought to be coasting on outmoded Soviet approaches and ignorant of risk-management strategies that they could use to balance openness with security. Because of this simplistic assessment, donors failed to address the distinct economic and state-building logic that shaped border management strategies in each Central Asian republic. Donors were pursuing a technocratic solution to a problem that was fundamentally political.

Fourth, the aid programs neglected to engage with frontier communities, and they began to integrate local communities into their work only in recent years and on a

limited scale. This neglect had an important consequence: international donors – reciting the [mantra of regionalism](#) and singing the praises of open borders and free trade – failed to notice instances when local populations switched their preferences from open borders to closed ones.

The Other Fergana

The tiny farming community of Burgundü on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border in northern Fergana feels off the beaten track, despite being adjacent to the highway that links Bishkek with the south of Kyrgyzstan. Local communities in Burgundü once advocated for an open border and benefited from unsanctioned, quasi-official trade and exchange with locals in neighboring Uzbekistan. But in recent years, they have become proponents of a closed border. It is one of many cautionary tales about how local communities create border regimes that serve their changing interests rather than those of their respective states or of donors who underwrite regional-connectivity projects.

From the mid-1990s to 2010, local communities in Burgundü created a de facto open border. Smugglers from Uzbekistan devised elaborate ways to carry cheap Uzbek gas and cotton over to the Kyrgyz side where it could be sold at higher prices. The area also became a conduit for day laborers from Uzbekistan to commute to the Kyrgyz side to build houses and pick cotton. Border authorities played their part, allowing the unauthorized migration and smuggling to take place in exchange for nominal fees that reportedly ranged from twenty to fifty cents. Meanwhile, local officials from Uzbekistan regularly and quietly crossed the border to ask their Kyrgyz counterparts to allow more reservoir water to flow to parched Uzbek fields.

The border remained relatively open even after the 2010 communal violence in Osh and Jalalabad, but from 2012 to 2014 the Uzbek state dispatched new border commanders to seal it off. Where there was once a low fence and a small ditch, there are now a series of tall barriers and patrol roads that make it much harder to pass. Locals in Burgundü express a positive view of the closed border. Farmers on the Kyrgyz side no longer face stiff competition from cheap produce smuggled from Uzbekistan, and they have diversified their crop production. At the same time, local NGOs and political parties are offering farmers cheaper harvesting technology and tractors, allowing them to produce at scale. As one farmer in Burgundü told me recently, “We researched the market to figure out what new crops we could grow, how to do it, and who to sell them to.”

Farmers in Burgundü note that the closure of the Uzbek border has allowed them to think on a more global level. They are keen to export, not only to other parts of Kyrgyzstan, but onwards to Kazakhstan and China. They expressed sophisticated assessments of the challenges and opportunities inherent in large-scale integration and connectivity projects be they Russian, Chinese, or American. And now that a post-Karimov Uzbekistan is considering relaxing its border control policies in favor of

regional openness and freer trade, communities on the other side no longer prefer an open border in their backyards.

The Next Twenty-Five Years: Rules of Thumb for Policymakers

Given the complex nature of border management in Central Asia over the past twenty-five years, how can we think about the next quarter century? On the one hand, we should not expect the next twenty-five years to be a mirror-image of the past. On the other hand, we should avoid the temptation to use the events taking place in any given week or month to make forecasts about the decades to come. It would be tenuous, for example, to claim that Uzbekistan's emerging reforms will definitively open the region's borders. Open borders can result in a regional trade boom, ethnic conflict involving Uzbek populations in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere, or both. Predicting a certain outcome is an unproductive venture.

Instead of making forecasts about the future of Central Asia, we can think more practically about how to design flexible border management assistance that reflects the region's key border dynamics: the complexities of local preferences, which are a patchwork of changing interests across the region; the interests of Central Asian rulers in acquiring revenue to pursue their favored path of state-building while staying in power; and the reality that Western overseas development assistance is declining.

With these dynamics in mind, policymakers and practitioners can use four rules of thumb to design good policies for the next twenty-five years:

Avoid the false mantra of walls versus bridges: The international community likes to talk about regional connectivity projects and the importance of building bridges rather than walls across borders. This is a false notion. A bridge is good if it is wanted by local populations. As we saw in the case of northern Fergana, a community's preference for open borders can change, especially when their economic fortunes no longer depend on cross-border trade and movement. Bridge-building projects will only bear fruit if they cater to an organic preference for openness.

Map the untroubled spots: We are good at mapping trouble spots but terrible at mapping untroubled places and understanding why they are conflict-free. Local NGOs, donor development agencies, and national policy institutes in Central Asia often publish studies of communal conflict and the factors that drive it in border areas; however, systematic attention is rarely given to studying cross-border communities that quietly and durably work with one another and with local authorities.

Donor states and international organizations that are sponsoring border management, customs reform, and connectivity projects can use such data to design better programs in service to local communities. It would also vastly improve our understanding of how

informal boundary regimes work, where they are likely to survive and prosper, and how to make them more resistant to illicit activities that pose a threat to local, national, and regional security. We can use such data to guide us in designing border assistance, tailoring it to changing circumstances, and minimizing harm to local populations.

Learn to live with corruption at border crossings: Observers often say that local communities face rapacious, indiscriminate, and heavy-handed corruption at and along Central Asia's borders. Yet it is not necessarily rapacious. Rates are stable and predictable and are often the result of a process of negotiation between locals and border guards where market rates prevail. It is rarely indiscriminate. Locals know how much, who, and how to pay. When this changes suddenly, trouble results, and border authorities often find themselves on the losing side. Insidious as corruption may seem, in its absence local communities would have a much harder time accessing the other side of the border.

Get down to specifics to do more with less: In an [era of limited budgets](#), we need to abandon holistic attempts to make over Central Asia's border-control institutions. EU states have a hard time living up to their own best practices to manage their borders, so it makes little sense to continue to export such practices to Central Asia. The ill-fated attempt by the OSCE to revamp Tajikistan's border police with a professional paid force based on European models is a stinging example of lost opportunity to put money toward more attainable and specific reforms.

It is time for donors to strategically prioritize what kinds of border management tasks they want to help Central Asian states to perform. This necessarily involves trade-offs as donors must choose whether to help Uzbek border authorities with pandemic surveillance and disease control or teach them to [intercept flora and fauna](#) being smuggled across their borders. It also requires being flexible and freeing up resources to help Central Asian officials deal with [emerging threats](#)—such as the return of foreign terrorist fighters or cross-border currency smuggling that is used to fund violent extremist activities. Such training does not come with the easy photo opportunity that donors and government officials get when they build a cross-border bridge, but it may be far more fundamental to local, regional, and international security.