

## **Water and energy conflict in Central Asia: A case of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Geographical location and abundance of natural resources have made Central Asian region vulnerable for external influences and internal conflicts. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and emergence of five independent Republics had not only left them with a difficult transition task but also conflicting inter-state relations. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan share the water of the one of the main river of Central Asia *i.e.* Syr Darya and allocation of the water of this river has become the main source of conflict between these republics. Therefore, contrasting seasonal demands of water of Syr Darya became the bone of contention and it had several times affected the diplomatic and political relation of these countries. Any political or diplomatic disagreement between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan definitely had its impact over the energy and water supply of both the countries to each other. However various Intergovernmental bodies have been created in order to settle the water and energy dispute between them but less change is visible as both of them have at times autocratically acted on this issue. In this paper I would highlight the issues pertaining to the use of water resources by the both republics and how these issues affected their bilateral relations.

**Key Words :** Water, Energy conflict, Geographical location, Bilateral relations.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Central Asia represents an important strategic geopolitical region, rich in water and hydrocarbons resources but is still economically backward constituting a strong multiplicity of ethnic groups<sup>[1]</sup>. The main reason behind the conflict among the Central Asian Republics (CARs) is the sharing of water and energy resources of the region. The root of this conflict can be traced back to the Soviet period when all the decisions related to sharing of resources and socio-economic developments were taken by the central authority in Moscow. The former Soviet Socialist Republics became independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union (SU) in 1991, thus socio-economic and political decisions solely went in the hands of newly independent governments. The disintegration of SU determined new international borders for all the republics and which created trouble while sharing the same water and energy resources of the region as it has now become the issue of their own political and economical interests<sup>[2]</sup>.

The border disputes between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan started just after their independence in the forms of inter-state and local conflicts making water and energy resources as one of the core

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of these conflicts supplementing cross border disputes. Water and Hydrocarbons have been used as the leverage in these conflicts while dealing with the inter-state relations with their neighbours. However, weak economic conditions of these republics compelled them to use their resources as a tool of negotiation in political and economical relations with each other. Moreover, inter-state disputes over using water and energy resources causing serious trouble for the regional security as well<sup>[3]</sup>.

Kyrgyzstan possesses one of the main water resources of the region that is Syr Darya and being an upstream country it shares water of this river with downstream Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan since Soviet times. The barter system between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was such that Kyrgyzstan received coal and gas supplies during the winter while in return it has to provide water in summer from its reservoirs to irrigate cotton crops in Uzbekistan. However, during the Soviet period, all the decisions of water related were commanded by the central authority which changed after its disintegration thus paving the way for increasing conflicts between upstream and downstream countries. Although, several agreements between them have taken place regarding the sharing of the resources but all have been breached by both of them on several occasions. The main reasons behind failing of these agreements are lack of trust and their national interests further deteriorating their bilateral relations<sup>[4]</sup>.

The backbone of Uzbekistan's economy is the intensive Cotton production even since Soviet times and it has used water from Syr Darya for irrigation purpose in summer. But after independence, political rivalry and border disputes changed the dynamics of relationship between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan<sup>[5]</sup>. On several occasions Uzbekistan has stooped energy supplies to Kyrgyzstan during winters which compelled Kyrgyzstan to be self-sufficient in energy production. It already had potential for hydropower production therefore started building Hydropower plants to cop up its energy needs and to reduce its dependency on Uzbekistan. This step created serious stress in their relationship because Kyrgyzstan using water for energy production distorted the Irrigation pattern of cotton crops in Uzbekistan. However Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have registered their concern on the issue with regional and international organizations at times but it has less effect on the issue of resource sharing between them<sup>[6]</sup>.

Political antagonism and lack of cooperation is the main reason why Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have differences over the water and energy resources. Regional and international organisations came forward to intermediate in this issue with creating inter-state water commission to look after the conflicting situation of water sharing in Central Asia. However, in the era of globalisation, energy and water security is an important factor of determining power structure of a state and so Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are also making themselves economically secure by keeping their own interests greater than others.

### **Issues related to the water and energy disputes between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan: *Contrasting Water and Energy requirements of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan :***

The arid climatic conditions of Uzbekistan required more irrigation for cotton crops as rainfall was less and evaporation was higher. However, Soviet officials decided to expand the irrigated land related to cotton production in Uzbekistan. The irrigated lands in Uzbekistan approximately got doubled between 1913 and 1950, and it reached to 4.2 million hectare in 1990. Consecutively, 61 per cent of agricultural land of Uzbekistan was devoted to cotton production after Soviet endeavours, which was unique in the world as this kind of specialization was nowhere evident. All this have been possible through diversion of the water of Amu Darya and Syr Darya for the irrigation purposes. Almost 90 per cent of the water of these rivers was used for the irrigation intensive cotton fields in

Uzbekistan<sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, since Soviet times cotton has been a major part of Uzbekistan's economy but after independence Kyrgyzstan's efforts of making itself energy secure by using water of Syr Darya to produce Hydropower made Uzbekistan wary as it would gradually deprive Uzbek Cotton production of enough water for irrigation purpose during summer. Upstream countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan planning to export surplus of their hydropower production to their South Asian neighbours, Pakistan and Afghanistan in order to get global exposure and financial excess<sup>[8]</sup>. Uzbekistan expressed its discontent against Kyrgyzstan's hydropower plants by stating that they are causing trouble for the environmental conditions of the region. These conflicting demands of water and energy resources between them made it inevitable to potential conflict limiting not only to water and energy but also border and ethnic clashes as well.

#### ***Political mistrust :***

Much needed cooperation can only be achieved through political will from the respective governments and leadership of both the countries. It has enough water resources to cater the need of their population, agriculture and industrial purposes, only if they are willing to share it with each other adhering to concerned agreements. However, the real problem is the incompetency of each government to find a new, feasible and mutually acceptable framework for cooperation. Therefore, it can be said that the allocation of the water resources are often seen through the prism of political ambitions while it is very important to bring about mutual agreements on abundant water resources of upstream countries and energy sufficient downstream countries in order to foster regional growth and substantial use of the resources<sup>[9]</sup>. Another important factor of arising conflict between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is the lack of political dialogue on water distribution and this has often taken some serious twists. In this regard, both the countries several times came on the verge of military confrontation related to the resource distribution and cross border ethnic conflict<sup>[10]</sup>.

#### ***Social and ecological liability :***

Management of water resources in Central Asia faces main challenges. The hydrological regime of Syr Darya is intricate and susceptible to the climatic changes. More and more use of water from this river for energy production and irrigation reducing water quality and quantity which directly affects the lives of million of people depend upon it<sup>[11]</sup>. Uzbekistan has blamed the trans-boundary distribution of water resources as the main reason of drying up of Aral Sea and creating ecological disaster in the surrounding areas<sup>[12]</sup>.

It is clearly evident that water and energy related issues have also augmented the ethnic clashes between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The conflict over access to land and water between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the Osh Oblast of southern Kyrgyzstan in June 1990 killed almost 300 people and left many more injured. However, these tensions have always been present but the prevalent socio-economic conditions are making them more prominent. Increasing population, unemployment, inter-state migration and uneven distribution of land water are some issues giving impetus to the inter-state conflict over resources<sup>[13]</sup>.

#### ***Prospects for the cooperation :***

Water and energy related conflicts are mostly driven by increasing need of these resources for economic development and uncertainty about the future of these resources. Conflict and cooperation are the two important sides of any regional or international dispute. Therefore international cooperation to solve these issues at both regional and global levels is mandatory and especially for

the economically and politically underdeveloped Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In this scenario, several attempts have been taken by the Regional and International actors to mitigate the tensions between these countries for better economic growth and sustainable developments.

### **Water agreements :**

In 1991, with the independence of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan from SU, there was an urgent need for designing cooperation on water management. In 1992, the very first agreement in this direction was signed in Almaty for joint management of water resources of Central Asia. With this agreement an Inter-state Commission for Water Management of Central Asia (ICWC) was established that worked towards the joint management of water distribution in the region. This commission was similar to its Soviet predecessor 'Minvodkhoz' but with some important changes to suit the current scenario of resource distribution<sup>[14]</sup>. Another important organisation to tackle the problems of the shrinking of the Aral Sea was formed as International Fund for saving the Aral Sea (IFAS). Both these institutions (ICWC and IFAS) have been limited in achieving their due goals because of the inter-state rivalries and political suspicion against each other. Uzbekistan was blamed to be favoured by these organisations on the basis that most of the staff of the organisations represented from Uzbekistan. Furthermore, political dialogues in this process got hindered because of mistrust and competition<sup>[15]</sup>. A number of agreements have been signed between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan almost every year since their independence in order to find a mutual solution for water and energy conflicts between them. Since 1997, more than 10 bilateral agreements and joint meetings have been taken place between them but result remained unsatisfactory. In fact, both of them are still using their leverages as a tool to put pressure on one another<sup>[16]</sup>.

### **Regional and international organizations :**

The regional organisations such as Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), and Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) are playing an active role in conflict resolution process in Central Asia. International organisations such as World Bank, the European Union (EU), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in coordination with the government of the Central Asian countries are trying their best to promote the policy of regional cooperation by creating river basin organisations for the effective and sustainable energy and water management in the region<sup>[17]</sup>. The EU along with UNDP approached Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) to form a model for cooperation without overlooking the national interests of the individual republics. However, Uzbekistan seemed to be marginalised itself from the project initiated by the IWRM, thus making the progress further complicated. Consequently, this has again been indicated that Uzbekistan's autocratic stand on trans-boundary water allocation is causing serious harm to the cooperation processes. However, Kyrgyzstan is also becoming more and more stagnant on its position to develop energy security without even considering the consequences. And the efforts of the international organisations are admiring but they are limited mostly on providing possible technical assistance and monetary support<sup>[18]</sup>.

### **Conclusion :**

Collapse of Soviet Union and the establishment of international borders between central Asian Republics have made the issue of accessing water and energy and maintaining the water

infrastructure an exceptionally complex issue. Various incidents of Tensions and even local violent clashes along the borders of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are persistent. Cross-border enclaves and the enforcement of state borders irrespective of ethnic variety are factors that swiftly shoot local disputes over water with an ethnic and trans- boundary outlook. The different stands on upstream hydro-power projects indicate that these projects should be in consideration with the regional, international support, thus fulfilling the required demands of sustainable developments. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been unable to resolve trans-boundary water and energy disputes which have created instability in their bilateral relations. Stressful ethnic relations and competition over land and water resources especially in the border region could be fatal in future as it has already been evident in past. The strain bilateral relations have further deteriorated regional stability in Central Asia. The inter-state relations of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and their incompetency in providing basic amenities water, agriculture and electricity are jolting socio-economic development which further creating resentment and potential for violent conflicts. It is recommended for these countries to come on a common platform a mutual understanding of sharing water and energy resources keeping in mind not only their own national interests but also regional security and stability.

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