

CURRENT STATE OF INTERSTATE BORDER ISSUES IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the causes, historical foundations, and consequences of border disputes among post-Soviet states in Central Asia—specifically Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. It argues that the transformation of administrative borders drawn during the Soviet era into present-day political boundaries has become a major source of regional tensions. The study offers an in-depth examination of conflicts in the Fergana Valley, ethnic clashes, competition over water and resources, extremist threats, and border security challenges. In addition, the article provides practical recommendations for promoting stability and cooperation across the region.

Keywords: Central Asia, border disputes, Fergana Valley, Soviet legacy, delimitation, demarcation, security, ethnic conflicts, political stability.

Introduction: Following their independence, the Central Asian states faced a range of inherited challenges from the Soviet Union. Among the most complex and pressing of these was the issue of interstate border disputes. The internal borders drawn during the Soviet era—primarily based on administrative and political interests—were transformed into international boundaries after independence, intensifying territorial, ethnic, and economic tensions. This was especially evident in densely populated and resource-rich regions such as the Fergana Valley, where such disputes pose serious threats to security, socio-economic stability, and regional cooperation.

The republics of Central Asia inherited both positive and negative legacies from the collapse of the USSR. On the positive side, investments were made into upper and lower levels of governance, including the development of highly educated specialists who contributed to national progress. On the negative side, they inherited complex environmental conditions, unresolved interstate borders, and challenges related to population distribution.

While these issues were previously resolved in Moscow during the Soviet period, independence required each republic to address them autonomously. Given their distinct capacities, characteristics, and advantages, each state sought to resolve existing problems from the perspective of its own national interests. This approach, however, led to disagreements and tensions among them. One of the most difficult challenges remains the delineation of interstate borders.

Main Body: The total length of internal borders between the Central Asian republics exceeds 8,000 kilometers. Kazakhstan has the longest internal border—3,955 km—while Turkmenistan has the shortest at 2,206 km. The longest shared border between two republics is the Kazakh-Uzbek border, stretching 2,330 km, whereas the shortest is the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan border at 413 km. Uzbekistan, located at the heart of the region in a crescent-like shape, shares borders with all other republics, which gives it particular strategic significance. Kazakhstan borders three republics, while the remaining states each share borders with two.

Prior to the Soviet Union, Central Asia lacked clearly defined borders. Administrative and regional boundaries were first drawn during the Soviet era, from the 1920s to the 1930s, based on Leninist principles of national self-determination.

Four key tensions shaped this process:

- Political directives from Moscow
- Ethnic complexities
- Influence of regional political and commercial elites

- Economic contradictions

Naturally, not all of these factors were present in every case. In some instances, two or more of these issues overlapped, complicating the process of border delineation.

Starting in 1924, the borders between the Central Asian republics began to be drawn arbitrarily and not always on a sound basis. In particular, the division of the Fergana Valley among Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan was carried out without consideration of the region's physical and geographical features. This arbitrary partitioning led to heightened tensions among the local populations.

For centuries, the peoples of the region had lived side by side, forming a rich multicultural ethno-mosaic. However, the Bolshevik-led border delineation forced many of these communities to find themselves outside the borders of their newly defined national states. As a result, they were compelled to abandon their homes and relocate to unfamiliar territories, often among semi-nomadic populations.

This arbitrary "division" of borders was partially offset by the Soviet policy of creating a unified space, which offered certain conveniences to the population—most notably, the ability for citizens of the USSR to freely cross republican borders.

While borders between republics during the Soviet era held regional and administrative status, after the dissolution of the USSR, they acquired the political status of international state borders in accordance with global standards.

Despite the signing of treaties on friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance following independence, territorial claims and disputes over border delimitation and clarification became serious interstate issues among the Central Asian republics. These conflicts were addressed through negotiations at the level of national leaders. As a result of prolonged and intensive talks, the border issues between Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have been resolved.

Nevertheless, the central focus of border disputes in the region remains the Fergana Valley—a tri-junction area shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Tensions among these three republics have arisen due to several factors:

- The valley is surrounded by mountains, making movement difficult. This has led to the emergence of illegal trade and transit routes, turning border issues into a constant topic of negotiation.

- All three republics seek to secure a larger share of the valley's fertile lands, which are rich in oil, gas, and other valuable mineral resources.

As a result, political crises and armed clashes have erupted among the three states. According to local and international media reports, most of these incidents have occurred along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border and have involved human casualties. One notable example is the attack carried out on November 6, 2019, by militants of the ISIS terrorist group on a border checkpoint between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The shootout resulted in the deaths of 15 militants and 2 border guards. Reports indicated that some of the attackers were citizens of Tajikistan.

The border issues in the Fergana Valley are closely tied to urgent security concerns. The fact that Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan share borders in this region has made the valley an attractive target for terrorist groups. Due to the lack of regulation in certain border sections between these republics, criminal networks, smugglers, and international terrorist organizations have actively exploited these crossing points for their own purposes.

The activities of terrorist groups have posed both internal and external threats to the republics of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Youth have proven to be particularly vulnerable: rapid population growth and high unemployment rates have facilitated their recruitment into radical religious and terrorist organizations. Shortly after Tajikistan declared independence, illegal armed

groups that had participated in the civil war—concluded in 1997—freely crossed unguarded borders, established connections with extremist movements in Uzbekistan, and engaged in subversive activities there.

Following the Tashkent bombings in 1999, Uzbekistan unilaterally closed its borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and began mining border areas to prevent the infiltration of extremists. Kyrgyzstan implemented similar measures along its border with Tajikistan. These actions negatively impacted the economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and led to civilian casualties: peaceful residents crossing borders outside official checkpoints suffered injuries and deaths due to landmines.

The tightening of border controls in the region has triggered waves of discontent among ethnic groups living in the Fergana Valley, particularly following the Uzbek government's reinforcement of its border security regime. This has led to frequent clashes between local residents and security forces, as strict surveillance has disrupted routine socio-economic interactions and undermined trust between neighboring republics.

A comparative analysis of border security among Central Asian republics reveals that the Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan border is the least problematic. In this area, there have been no reports of armed clashes among local populations or severe political crises between the two states.

However, ethnic differences, the valley's complex mountainous geography, and the convergence of the borders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have become key factors contributing to the emergence of disputes and the intensification of security threats. These dynamics have also negatively impacted the political stability and economic development of the region's states.

One of the main causes of border disputes among the republics was the absence of legal frameworks recognizing the borders established by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Since 1924, the delineation of borders failed to account for the centuries-long settlement patterns of various ethnic groups. After gaining independence, this oversight led to border confusion and disrupted the normal lives of local populations. Ethnic groups left outside their national states became another source of tension and territorial claims among the republics.

The border issues inherited from the Soviet era continue to seriously affect security and stability in Central Asia. During the Soviet period, border adjustments were made based on agreements aimed at resolving local territorial matters. However, the borders established during that time gave rise to numerous socio-economic problems following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These included the division of fertile agricultural lands between republics, the separation of family members, and logistical difficulties in transportation.

Moreover, within the framework of newly established state borders, the separation of certain ethnic groups based on national and religious characteristics—and the merging of others—has led to heightened tensions and interethnic conflicts, particularly in the Fergana Valley. Disputes over the use of natural resources such as land, water, and mineral deposits located in the border regions shared by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have become another major source of instability. These conflicts have posed direct threats to the safety of populations living along the dividing lines.

Another contributing factor to the emergence of border issues in Central Asia is the influence of political clans and the personal ambitions of local leaders. These elements have complicated the processes of border delimitation and demarcation between states. The practice of leasing land plots and territories continues to affect border adjustments, although similar arrangements occurred during the Soviet era. However, in the context of a unified state and the absence of clearly defined inter-republican borders, such practices were not perceived as problematic.

In the post-Soviet period, investment projects in transportation and other infrastructure sectors have become new sources of tension. During the Soviet era, southern republics had limited

connectivity with the north due to the lack of an integrated transport network. After the collapse of the Union, the passage of newly established national railways and highways through the borders of independent states became a contentious issue, as their construction had not accounted for the future international status of those borders.

These disputes have intensified particularly in the border regions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Thus, a combination of factors—ranging from political ambitions and infrastructure projects to historical and socio-economic conditions—has significantly complicated the process of establishing stable and mutually recognized state borders among the Central Asian republics.

Debates over the establishment of state borders in Central Asia began during the Soviet era. The primary reason for these disputes was that the borders drawn at the time reflected administrative and political realities rather than the region's naturally formed ethno-cultural and geographic structure. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these borders became sources of numerous interstate and interethnic conflicts, which have proven extremely difficult to resolve.

Following the rise to power of Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, a number of agreements on border issues were reached in a relatively short period. However, despite the existence of official agreements, the content of these documents remains insufficiently transparent. One of the factors that contributed to peaceful resolutions was the geographic and economic condition of the border regions. Specifically, this refers to sparsely populated, barren lands lacking significant natural resources—such as deserts and steppes. These areas helped reduce tensions and allowed the parties at the time to avoid large-scale conflicts.

Conclusion: Border issues in Central Asia continue to hinder interregional cooperation and remain a source of interstate tensions and ethnic conflicts. Many view this as a legacy of the Soviet Union's policy of drawing administrative borders between republics without considering geographic and ethnic factors. As Nik Megoran notes, Soviet leaders could not have imagined that these administrative boundaries would one day become the borders of sovereign states. Consequently, territorial disputes emerged, and the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia came dangerously close to opening a Pandora's box.

Although some observers predicted violent redrawing of borders, this did not occur. Instead, countries chose to accept the administrative boundaries established during the Soviet era. Nevertheless, it is now time to resolve territorial disputes that have long obstructed regional trade, led to economic blockades, closed borders, and severed communication routes. Addressing these issues would also strengthen regional security by curbing drug trafficking and the spread of religious extremism.

Recent positive developments in the region—most notably Uzbekistan's shift in foreign policy toward openness—offer hope for a final resolution of territorial disputes in the Fergana Valley. Active diplomatic negotiations, a series of agreements on border issues, and growing initiatives for economic cooperation are laying the groundwork for peaceful solutions. This progress is not only vital for ensuring security but also for enhancing regional integration, restoring economic ties, and promoting social stability.

Therefore, the following approaches are essential for resolving border disputes:

- Objectively assessing the historical formation of borders and approaching the issue within the framework of international law
- Reaching long-term, stable agreements that consider the interests of all three parties
- Making decisions that reflect the socio-economic needs of populations living in border areas
- Strengthening mutually beneficial cooperation in the use of transport, water, electricity, and other resources

- Coordinating border management not only politically but also from a security standpoint. Ultimately, resolving border disputes is not merely a territorial matter—it is directly linked to the region's future, security, and development. Only a comprehensive, long-term, and inclusive approach can transform Central Asia into a stable and integrated region.

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