

## **Water Diplomacy and Water Disputes in the Central Asian Region**

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### **Abstract**

Water plays an important role in Central Asia. This area is more than 4 million square kilometers of breadth which includes Post-Soviet Republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan and covers more than Indian Subcontinent's breadth and has a population of about 60 million people. Due to the fact that Central Asian is located in a dry and semi-arid belt, agriculture would be possible through irrigation and it is not expected to produce dried crops. As a result, artificial water distribution systems are needed. In the late nineteenth century with the conquest of all parts of Central Asia by the Russian Empire, new water distribution systems for flax production were carried out on a wider scale than in comparison with the past. As a result the seemingly endless Central Asian Water Resources began to decline from 1960s when the rapid increase in demand for water started by drainage of rivers and reducing groundwater resources, as well as degradation of water and soil quality. The drying of "Aral Lake" is also the result of the same Water Management policies that were adopted during the Soviet Era.

Agriculture is a reasonable point for Central Asian Economy and products such as flax and rice need plenty of water and irrigation. In addition, irrigation systems in the area have been severely eroded; so half of the water resources never flow to the farm lands and goes to spits. Several years of drought has also taken place in the area and is still likely to happen again. But due to political and economic rivalries between the countries of the region, they have not been able to agree on a replacement system instead of the Soviet Era Water Resources Management System. After the collapse

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of the Soviet Union in 1991, the change in natural resources management in each Central Asian Autonomous Republics occurred. The result of this historic event was the rivalry over water resources which were alarmingly increasing in the region and were leading to potential tensions in Central Asian republics. Therefore the political climate became tense. Water Pricing will save this problem. In Central Asian Region, water should be distributed with market prices by eliminating water subsidies which was a legacy of the Soviet Union era.

In Central Asia, given that most of the region's water surfaces originate from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the two countries apply stringent water abstraction systems while the downstream countries which include Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, naturally feel threatened by the two upstream countries and try to counter the threats. But the disagreements that exist between the downstream countries on water distribution prevent these countries from uniting and cooperating with each other against the upstream countries. In fact, all countries of Central Asian Region feel threatened by each other and choose their allies from trans-region. As Kazakhstan and Russia, both worried about Uzbekistan's threats (Kazakhstan is competing with Uzbekistan and Russia over the leadership of the region due to its lack of presence in Uzbekistan) and united with each other.

The main question of the article is why Water Diplomacy between the countries of Central Asian states, despite cultural, linguistic, religious and geographical proximities with each other, has not been successful so far, that these countries have adopted less cooperative regional approaches to water issues and each one seeks to find trans-regional allies? The answer to this question based on "Defensive Realism Theory" is that the issue of water along with ethnic and border disputes have become a security issue in relations between the countries of Central Asia, because of the threat they feel from each other and seek to find trans-regional allies which have common benefits for them. Therefore, due to the fact that Water Diplomacy in Central Asian Region is not inherent in origin and is influenced by border and ethnic disputes, as a result, it has not been successful in resolving regional conflicts.

Regarding the dependence of most Central Asian states economy to common and trans-boundary waters, the issue of Water Management is of a great importance in the region. Water Diplomacy in Central Asia after the independence of the countries of the region in February 1992 was manifested in the framework of an "Almaty Agreement" between all Central Asian states which demanded maintenance of allocation of Water Resources from the Soviet time. In 2008, Kazakhstan's president as a downstream country,

as well as Tajikistan's and Kyrgyzstan Presidents, as upstream countries agreed on a plan of exchanging water and energy; But Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which were dependent on Water Resources of upstream countries, demanded the maintenance of the Almaty Agreement and their previous status in the Soviet era and did not attend the meeting. The reason for Kazakhstan's agreement is the large breadth of the country and its lack of dependence to "Syr Darya". Of course, with the change of ruling government in Uzbekistan, the country has welcomed negotiations on water resources and even supported the development of water facilities in Tajikistan.

The downstream countries of Central Asian Region including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan were defined by agriculture in the Soviet era due to their fertile lands; so much of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan's water was transferred to these countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Based on Defensive Realism Theory, all states seek to preserve their past position and their main behavior in foreign policy is the balance of threats against those states that threaten their position. Although all of downstream countries in the region feel threatened by upstream countries in the context of water, there are some disagreements among these countries. They cannot unite against a common threat and in fact no kind of strong cooperation agreement at the level of the Central Asian Region can be formed among them. Therefore, the countries of the region are looking for trans-regional allies and the disagreement over common water resources (due to the regional water crisis) alongside ethnic and border disputes have become one of the main reasons for the divergence of the countries of the Central Asian Region.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Common Water Resources, Trans-boundary Rivers, Water Diplomacy, Water Disputes.