

Water Conflict in Central Asia: Is a solution possible?

Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, which gained their independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, have some problems in sharing their water resources. This chronic water conflict, together with the existing problems regarding their demography and borders, leads to the increasing tensions in the region. Yet hope arises when Uzbekistan's Shavkat Mirziyoyev who came to power in December 2016 created a positive expectation for a solution by bringing new projects to the agenda.

Common System in Water Sharing

Amudarya (Oxus), one of the two major rivers feeding the Aral Sea, takes about 80% of the water it carries from Tajikistan. While Syr Darya irrigates the agricultural lands of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan from its source in Kyrgyzstan, Amu Darya spreads over a wide geography including Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Hydroelectric power plants in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan such as Kambarata, Toktogul and Nurek - littoral to the two major rivers during the Soviet Union period - provided electrical energy to the entire region, including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The waters stored in these dams were also used effectively, especially for Uzbek and Kazakh agricultural lands. Thus, a common energy and agriculture system was established in the region in those years.

However, with the emergence of national borders and economies after the dissolution of the union, the previous divisions of labor have largely come to an end. Nonetheless, the five Central Asian republics signed the Almaty Agreement in 1992 to preserve the status quo in the region and to maintain the Soviet-era water sharing system. Despite this agreement, each republic tried to secure its irrigation and energy needs with its own national means.

As a matter of fact, while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which declared that this agreement was not fair, were considering gaining from water sharing, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan found it more profitable to sell energy to non-regional countries. In the new process, the cooperative balance between these states deteriorated. In order to find a solution to this problems, a second attempt was made in 1998; Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan met in Bishkek and signed the agreement on the "use of water and energy resources in the Syr Darya River basin". Although the agreement contains articles related to the water supply of the parties and accordingly the exchange of energy resources, it failed to serve as the solution to the problem.

HEPP Projects and Disputes

On paper, the common system continued for a while. But in 2009, when Uzbekistan announced that it was withdrawing from the supply system, a serious energy shortage hit Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In response to Uzbekistan's move, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan brought HEPP projects to the agenda in order to solve their chronic energy problems. If the Rogun hydroelectric power plant in south Tajikistan and the Kambarata power plant in Kyrgyzstan start working at full capacity, other countries in the region will be adversely affected by this situation. In addition, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan's use of more water to generate electricity in winter has lessen the amount of water that reached the agricultural lands of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Islam Karimov, who ruled Uzbekistan for more than a quarter of a century, openly expressed his opposition to HEPP projects many times. Karimov clearly gave the message that such big projects that could harm other countries in the region, and in the end it could drag the Central Asian countries into war. Consequently, Karimov's harsh stance further fueled the regional conflict.

While Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are rich in energy resources, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are rich in water resources. In the spring and summer months, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan need water to grow their agricultural products, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan need electricity and natural gas in winter.

Unfortunately, this potential mutualism symbiosis gave rise to conflict rather than bringing up a common system.

A New Hope

Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who came to power in Uzbekistan in December 2016 after the death of Islam Karimov, managed to restore the deteriorated relations with its neighbors and the wider international community in a short time. Mirziyoyev takes a much more moderate stance than his predecessor regarding the water problem in Central Asia. Mirziyoyev approaches the big HEPP projects that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan want to establish in a more constructive and conciliatory manner, arguing that an international agreement should be made on the equal use of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers. The message of reaching a consensus on the use of energy and water potential in the region was brought up for the first time by Mirziyoyev in 2017; it brought a new process to the agenda regarding the solution of the water problem.

This message was quickly responded to in Kyrgyzstan and stated that they would be pleased to cooperate with Tashkent in all HEPP projects planned in the country, especially the Kambarata project. Kazakhstan also argued that water resources belong to the entire region and that their use should be provided without harming other countries. Kazakh authorities brought up the project of establishing an advisory board between five states on water.

The protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022 and the war initiated by Russia in Ukraine further increased the idea of cooperation in the countries of the region. The importance of turning to diplomacy by staying away from conflict and crisis becomes clearer. At this point, the five states need multilateral cooperation on water sharing without a third party. In this direction, the most important issue is the calculation of mutual interests and the establishment of a new process accordingly.