

Mutual Gains from Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Border Treaty

Ethnic distribution, use of energy and water, and border problems continue to be the main issues of disagreement among Central Asian states after their independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The borders drawn by the arbitrary decisions of the Soviet administrators between 1924-1936 caused conflicts, especially between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, which could be felt particularly in regard to the Fergana Valley. Some of the last large-scale border conflicts between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan occurred in September 2022, and it only increased concerns about the stability in the region. However, the border negotiations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, which went on for over a year, were completed in November 2022 and approved by both parliaments.

We can associate the beginning of this historical step, which can be considered a turning point in terms of regional politics, with the appointment of the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in 2016. Mirziyoyev - who pursued a policy of swiftly restoring the relations that his predecessor, Islam Karimov, had broken with his neighbors and the international community - started negotiations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in regard to their border issues. As a matter of fact, in 2017, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan followed an agreement to determine 85% of the 1,378 kilometers borders. Negotiations continued and various meetings were held for the remaining part of the disagreement.

At this point, Kyrgyzstan President Sadiir Caparov, who took office in October 2020 after the popular protests in the country, followed a clear policy in resolving the border disputes that have become a chronic problem in his country. In this context, while the Kyrgyz and Uzbek delegations came together to negotiate the disputed borders in Tashkent on 23-25 March 2021, a protocol was signed that all problems were resolved, including mutual land exchanges. After the meeting, the Chairman of the Kyrgyzstan National Security Committee, Kamchibek Tashiyev's statement that "The Uzbek-Kyrgyz border problems have been resolved 100%. There is not a single disputed piece of land left", aroused wide public interest.

According to the protocol, it has been reflected in the media that the Kempir-Abad or Andijan reservoir, which belongs to Kyrgyzstan, will be transferred to Uzbekistan and different lands will be taken in return. Despite reactions by the Kyrgyz public - especially the Kyrgyz residents who benefited from the dam - the negotiations continued. During the negotiations, Russia attempted to invade Ukraine in February 2022; this, and the border conflicts between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan further increased the importance of the agreement. In fact, after the negotiations, 4,485 hectares of the Kempir-Abad were transferred to Uzbekistan, and it was decided that Tashkent would give 19,699 hectares of its land to Kyrgyzstan in return.

After the objections of the Kyrgyz public towards the agreement, Caparov made a statement on Facebook on October 6, 2022, and tried to calm the opponents. Stating that Bishkek will control 99% of the lands it claims after this agreement, Caparov stated that it would be seen more clearly which lands will pass Kyrgyzstan after the agreement is finalized. He also claimed that Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan will have equal rights in the management of the dam and demanded patience from the people. In this regard, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan ratified the agreement in their parliaments in November 2022.

Within the scope of the agreement, it has been determined that both countries will have equal rights in the use of the dam water while the Kempir-Abad reservoir crosses Uzbekistan. The Uzbek side has committed to keep the dam water at a certain level, to provide Kyrgyz citizens with free and unhindered access to the dam's water resources, and not to build an additional structure on the source. It was decided that Tashkent would give 19,699 hectares of land to the Bishkek administration in return for the dam. In this framework, delegations from both countries are expected to hold final consultations on demarcation in the first months of 2023. With this agreement, it was announced that the previously disputed 302-kilometer border between the two countries was dissolved.

Significance of the Agreement and Public Reactions

This agreement may also eliminate the problems experienced in mutual water and energy supply in the coming period. However, while this historical agreement was expected to be a turning point in terms of bilateral relations, its impact on the Kyrgyz public was different. Caparov, who also planned to achieve a

political victory by resolving a thirty-year-old conflict, faced the opposition's unrest. People of the region who use the water believe that this agreement will affect them negatively and the transfer of the dam, namely the Kyrgyz land, to another country, has only increased the reactions. In addition, the fact that the agreement's text was not fully disclosed led to criticism towards the Kyrgyz parliament. Although Caparao emphasized that there would be common management in the use of dam water and Kyrgyzstan acquired larger lands, objections continued.

In particular, a group called Kempir-Abad's Defense Committee, among which there are well-known names, organized demonstrations on October 22, condemning the agreement and demanding the disclosure of the entire agreement to the public. On October 23, 20 activists were detained on charges of planning a riot and plotting a coup. These activists, consisting of former ambassadors, soldiers, and politicians, wrote a letter to Mirziyoyev demanding that the agreement be stopped. On 27 December, the Bishkek city court decided to extend the detention of the activists. The coups that brought Caparov to power and became a political tradition in Kyrgyzstan also worry the current president.

After thirty years of disagreement, the determined stance of both administrations has led to a reconciliation. Russia's attempt to invade Ukraine and the global risks it brought show the value of the agreement even more. At this point, the Organization of Turkish States made a great contribution to the agreement with its support. The increasing influence of the Organization and the sense of trust created among its member states positively affected the process.

Solving border problems between central powers is a big step, however, its implementation may take time. Enclaves, another subject of border disputes, and the condition of the peoples of the region on the newly created borders will determine the course. However, possible developments in water and energy supply and mutual trust will affect both bilateral relations and regional stability in a positive way.