

KYRGYZSTAN-TAJIKISTAN BORDER SKIRMISHES (2022) AND WANING RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

Since their independence, Central Asian republics witnessed most serious interstate military escalation between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 2022 which left several dead and hundreds injured. There is around 600 KMs of disputed border between the two states which is the major bone of contention. This war also led to a substantial damage to civilian properties. This study analyses the reasons, intensity and outcomes of the war. It particularly evaluates the Russian role in conflict resolution and impacts of this war on the regional security. Findings show that Russian involvement in Ukraine war has negatively impacted its ability to keep influence in the Central Asian region. Russian led CSTO also offered diplomatic solution by connecting both parties through telephonic conversation. Research recommends a regional mechanism to resolve the border conflicts not only between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan but in the whole region.

Keywords: Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Central Asia, Border Conflict, Conflict Resolution, Mediation.

Introduction

The awful events taking place on the Ukrainian frontlines are shaking the entire world. However, other conflicts that could have a significant impact on regional and possibly even global security continue to go unrecognised. One such incident is the recent uptick in hostilities along the Tajik-Kyrgyz border, which was mostly ignored by the international media. The shooting at borders between the two Central Asian nations is nothing new, but the escalation in September 2022 should raise considerably

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more concerns in the region. Both the neighbours accuse each other of the start of military conflict.

Conflicts have become very complex and protracted due to the overlapping issues related to politics, culture, ethnicity, language and economy. When it comes to border conflicts or regional conflicts it characterizes the complexity of the involvement of numerous actors like state actors, sub state actors and the penetration of regional dynamics related to their colonial history. As a result, purpose of the study is to analyse the role of Russia to deescalate this conflict.

On September 14, 2022, gunfire was exchanged between Tajik and Kyrgyz forces at many sites along the border, including in villages and towns where people lived.¹ Both nations have traded the responsibility for starting the conflict. Despite efforts to achieve a truce, artillery firing intensified on September 16 and expanded from border regions into the indisputable Kyrgyz territory, in particular the city of Batken. Hard weapons were used in the battle, such as tanks and rocket launchers. On the Kyrgyz side, at least 62 individuals—including civilians—died as a result, and 140,000 people were forced to flee their homes.² In Kyrgyzstan, hundreds of homes and other pieces of civil infrastructure were set ablaze and destroyed. The Tajik government has reported 35 fatalities.³ Furthermore, there are no official reports about government led evacuations from Tajikistan but they claimed that civilian homes were burnt and people are seriously wounded because of these clashes.⁴

During April 2021, fight broke out along the border between the provinces of Sughd (Tajikistan) and Batken (Kyrgyzstan). Major reason for the conflict was control over the Golovnoy water distribution system, which separates what Tajiks and Kyrgyz refer to as the Isfara and the Ak-Suu River respectively.⁵ This water infrastructure is located on territory that both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan claim. Since Agri-Pastorals are the major occupation of the people in these regions, water is the major source for these occupations. This water is also used for electricity production for the local

¹“Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan Exchange Sustained Fire in Remote Border Location,” *Eurasianet*. (September 14, 2022). Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-exchange-sustained-fire-in-remote-border-location> (accessed November 15, 2022).

²David Loyn, “Central Asia has not been so unstable since the fall of the Soviet Union,” *The National*, (October 17, 2022). Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/2022/10/17/central-asia-has-not-been-so-unstable-since-the-fall-of-the-soviet-union/> (accessed November 15, 2022).

³Ibid.

⁴“Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border Clashes Prove Deadly for Civilians,” *Human Rights Watch*, (September 21, 2022). Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/21/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-border-clashes-prove-deadly-civilians> (accessed November 15, 2022).

⁵ Op cit.

regions. Small scale clashes between the local communities are routine over water distribution. Communities at both sides of the border use pebbles, sticks and other non-lethal weapons in such clashes. But this time, the conflict quickly got intensified and involved troops from both sides.⁶ Even on May 1, 2021, before a truce went into force dozens of people perished, hundreds were injured, and thousands fled to other regions.⁷

According to one viewpoint, the fighting started because of long-standing disagreements over boundaries and demography. The artificial borders erected by the former Soviet authorities, that complicate the administration of trans-border resources, have made local rivalry for arable land and water worse. The Fergana Valley, which spans portions of northern Tajikistan, southern Kyrgyzstan, and eastern Uzbekistan, is especially rich in ethnic exclaves, where the citizens of one Central Asian republic are encircled by the territory of a neighbouring nation.⁸ Notably, there is still work to be done on more than a third of the 974 kilometre state border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Both the states claim their sovereignty over different regions in the border zone while using the Soviet maps. Conflicts break out in particular locations; in the Kyrgyz villages, they happen in the Ak-Sai, Kok-Taş, Samarkandyk, Tajik Corku, Surh districts and two Tajik exclaves Vorukh and Kayragach.⁹ Emomali Rahmon, the Tajik president since 1994, and Kyrgyz presidents have been unable to resolve this problem.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have worked to resolve the social, political, and economic issues brought on by the breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The relationships between neighbours are impacted by these underlying issues. Due to the abundance of productive farmland, the hazy terrain, illicit crossings, animal grazing, and control over water supplies, tensions frequently develop between border guards and locals. Soviet authorities introduced “tenured based property rights” which gave equal rights to both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to access and use natural

⁶Julia Emptseva, “Small conflicts with big impact: The Tajik-Kyrgyz war no one talks about,” *European Journal of International Law*, (October 11, 2022). Available at: <https://www.ejiltalk.org/small-conflicts-with-big-impact-the-tajik-kyrgyz-war-no-one-talks-about/> (accessed November 15, 2022).

⁷“Kyrgyz Tajik officials reach agreement on troop pullback truce after deadly border clashes.” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, (May 2, 2021). Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyz-tajik-border-troop-pullback-deadly-clashes-ceasefire/31232855.html> (accessed February 10, 2023)

⁸ S. A. R. I. Yasar, "Identity-conflict relations: A case-study of the Ferghana valley conflicts," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 14(4), (2013), 7-16.

⁹Pauline Jones Luong and Pauline Jone, *Institutional change and political continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: power, perceptions, and pacts*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

resources of those areas.¹⁰ There are pastoral lands common between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that were being used by the pastoral communities of both countries. Most of the land today comes under the border of Kyrgyzstan whereas Tajiks consider it their own as well. During the Soviet times it was considered as common resource but new Kyrgyz pasture law considers Tajik community as foreigner to use it as a resource.

Historical Background

The two nations have continually traded gunfire since 1991(2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2015).¹¹ According to some accounts, there were 63 violent occurrences on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border between the years of 2011 and 2013, ranging from hostage-taking to minor altercations.¹²The fighting became more intense in April 2021.¹³ At least a dozen Kyrgyz villages in the districts of Batken and Leilek, which border Tajikistan and include the enclave Vorukh, saw the start of extensive warfare. The installation of security cameras at a water distribution point close to Vorukh was the cause of the escalation. As a result, hundreds of people were hurt on both sides, including at least 41 fatalities.¹⁴

It is concerning that violence has increased during the past two years. The events of 2021 led to an extraordinary response from Kyrgyz civic society. A request to open an inquiry into suspected war crimes committed by Tajik government officials was made to the International Criminal Court in June 2021 by Kyrgyz academics, along with a number of NGOs and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Back in May 2000, Tajikistan approved the agreement that giving the Court the right to exercise territorial jurisdiction although Kyrgyz government didn't ratify.¹⁵ The Kyrgyz president, who advocated for using other methods to settle the disagreements between the two countries, refused to support this idea.

At a contested border stretch, border guards from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan exchanged gunfire after a dispute on September 14, 2022. Drones, tanks, aircraft, and an exchange of rocket fire were all used during

¹⁰Gulzana Kurmanalieva, "Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Endless Border Conflicts," *The EU, Central Asia and the Caucasus in the International System no. 6* (February, 2019). Available at: https://www.cife.eu/Ressources/FCK/EUCACIS_Online%20Paper%20No%204%20-%20Kurmanalieva.pdf (accessed February 10, 2023).

¹¹Op cit.

¹²Charles J. Sullivan, "Battle at the Border: An Analysis of the 2021 Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Conflict," *Asian Affairs* 52(3), (2021), 529-535.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴"Kyrgyzstan says ceasefire agreed with Tajikistan after clashes." *Al Jazeera*, (April 29, 2021). Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/29/kyrgyzstan-says-agreed-ceasefire-with-tajikistan-after-clashes> (accessed January 19, 2023)

¹⁵Oxford Analytica, "Kyrgyz-Tajik clashes risk more serious escalation," *Emerald Expert Briefings oxan-es*, (2021).

the two-day, violent standoff. At least 94 people were killed and more than 100 were injured in the deadliest violence in years. Due to the unrest, over 137,000 people have been evacuated from the disputed border territory in the Batken and Osh districts of Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶ There were no reports of a Tajik Side evacuation. Both nations have charged each another with aggressiveness. The border villages of Kulundu, Maksat, and Jani-Jer were shelled by Tajik forces, according to the Kyrgyz side, who also claimed that modern equipment and weapons were employed. Following altercations with Tajik border guards, Kyrgyzstan declared an emergency in the Batken region.

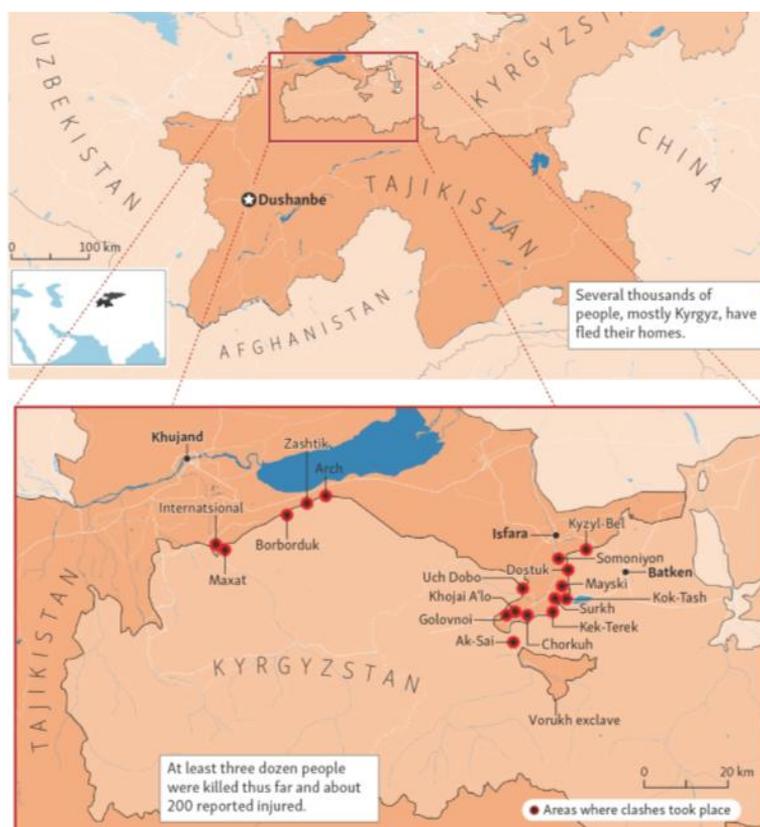


Image: Disputed border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan
Source: <https://www.legacyias.com/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-conflict/>

¹⁶“Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border clashes claim nearly 100 lives,” *BBC*, (September 19, 2022). Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62950787> (accessed on April 20, 2023).

On the other hand, Tajik officials claimed that Kyrgyz forces were targeting civilian properties, including homes, and had demolished a mosque. Additionally, according to Tajikistan's security agencies, Kyrgyzstan was assembling military assets and supplies near to the border in anticipation of provocations.¹⁷

Fight along the tense border between the two former Soviet neighbours in Central Asia started on the eve of regional security body meeting when Kyrgyz border guards accused Tajik taking positions on the disputed border. Issue is made worse by the accusations and denials made by the two administrations. In the post-Soviet era, the 1920s Soviet border delimitation, which sought to partition Central Asian administrative boundaries along ethnic lines, was found to be ineffective. Due to the mixing of various ethnic groups, the Farghana Valley, which is shared by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, is a region with a high population and fertile terrain.¹⁸ There have been a number of tragic interethnic conflicts in this resource-rich Valley, which must be shared fairly by overlapping ethnic groups in border areas. The main source of contention between the three Central Asian countries that share the valley has been the question of enclaves and exclaves.

Throughout the Soviet era, disputes between republics and administrative divisions involved the distribution of land, water, and pasture. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, these tensions further intensified. According to government data, the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan spans more than 974 kilometres, yet only 504 of those kilometres have been marked. Particularly in the northern Tajik province of Isfara and in Vorukh, a Tajik exclave with 30,000 residents in Kyrgyzstan's Batken Province abutting Tajikistan's Sughd Province with 16,000 Tajiks, hence social tensions are common on both sides.¹⁹ The legalisation of private property ownership and Kyrgyzstan's declaration of some leased Tajik pastures as its own furthered the tense situation.

Reasons of the Conflict

1. Dynamics of two Central Asian States

Internal dynamics of each country contribute in the policy making as well as legitimization or otherwise of a regime. Since independence, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been facing several challenges including but not limited to weak economy, extremism and terrorism threats, political turmoil (civil war in case of Tajikistan and so called democratic revolutions

¹⁷“Tajikistan says Kyrgyzstan hides military hardware close to border, despite ceasefire deal.” *Radio Free Europe /Radio Liberty*, (September 21, 2022). Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-clashes-border-military-hardware/32044579.html> (accessed on April 12, 2023).

¹⁸Op cit.

¹⁹Op cit.

in case of Kyrgyzstan), and external influence in the form of Russia as security guarantor. It is assumed that regimes of both countries do not want a real solution to the border conflict. The ethnic conflict is used as a tool (or excuse) to strengthen and legitimise their rules.

As previously indicated, in disputes between the two countries over the past ten years, concerns about the use of land and water have been more important. During this time, there were over 150 documented instances of tension and conflict between them, with significant casualties as a result of the aforementioned factors. Many individuals died in the most recent fatal battle, which broke out in April 2021; Most of them were from Kyrgyzstan and some were from Tajikistan.²⁰Tajikistan's geographical integrity might be in danger if it settles its border issues with Kyrgyzstan. Any practical resolution to this problem has thus far been postponed. In the upcoming years, President Rahmon also plans to transfer authority to his son. Therefore, any compromise on Tajik territorial integrity might work against his goals.

Kyrgyzstan has had numerous so called colour revolutions in the recent past. In the most recent revolution, Sadyr Japarov, a populist leader, was elected president. To stabilise the domestic situation, he had to overcome number of challenges. Border conflict with Tajikistan is one of the most serious. In order to resolve the issue peacefully, Japarov has advocated for negotiation, discussion, and adherence to international laws, yet one of his key priorities has been to increase armed capabilities for the sake of self defence. President Japarov opened the Border Guard Service's Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) base just a day before the current clash.²¹ He told the border guards that “maintaining Kyrgyzstan's border security was a top priority for the government. We are responsible for taking all necessary actions to improve the capacity of our border guards.”²²Turkish drones, which the Tajik side claimed were used in the border battle with it, were recently purchased by Kyrgyzstan as well.²³

The sole democratic nation in post-Soviet Central Asia is Kyrgyzstan, which has had numerous colour revolutions. In the most recent revolution, Sadyr Japarov, a populist leader, was elected president. To stabilise the domestic situation in the nation, he must overcome a number of challenges. The Tajikistan border issue presents serious difficulties for his

²⁰ Sergey Zhiltsov, "External actors in Central Asia: Multilateral Cooperation Mechanisms," *Central Asia & the Caucasus*, 22(3), (2021).

²¹ Cian Stryker, "Importing Chinese Surveillance Technology: Are Central Asian States on the Path to Digital Authoritarianism?." PhD diss., (2022).

²²Ibid.

²³Fehim Tastekin, "Are Turkish drones complicating disputes in Central Asia," *Al-Monitor*, (September 26, 2022). Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/are-turkish-drones-complicating-disputes-central-asia> (accessed on April 22, 2023).

government. He has advocated for negotiation, discussion, and adherence to international laws, yet one of his key priorities has been to increase armed capabilities. But President Japarov opened the Border Guard Service's Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) base just a day before the current clash.²⁴ He told the border guards that maintaining Kyrgyzstan's border security was a top priority for the government. We are responsible for taking all necessary actions to improve the capacity of our border guards. Turkish drones, which the Tajik side claimed were used in the border battle with Tajikistan, were recently purchased by Kyrgyzstan.

Significantly, when tensions between these two nations and Uzbekistan subsided, fight broke out between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In fact, Tashkent has evolved into one of the most cooperative partners in recent years, whereas Uzbekistan had the most antagonistic stance toward its neighbours under its former regime. This is crucial, not only because of Uzbekistan's strategic location in the middle of Central Asia and its potential for border conflicts, but also because Tashkent has demonstrated how effective leadership can avert future confrontations. The Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan dispute increases the likelihood of other unfrozen hostilities and drastic boundary alterations, however, if the most recent fighting ushers in a new period of military conflict between Central Asian republics.

This latter viewpoint would be consistent with the theory that Moscow may take advantage of tensions to increase its influence, both directly and in relation to other countries like China. Supporting initiatives to build mechanisms among Central Asian leaders to manage such border tensions independently of outside forces would be one way to mitigate this negative impact.

2. Border area Contestation of State Territoriality

All around the former Soviet Union, conflicts have become more violent. Armed battles between Tajik and Kyrgyz military personnel took place on the border of the Batken area in southern Kyrgyzstan. In a region where occasional provocations and skirmishes are common place, this was a major escalation of hostilities between the two nations. Each nation accused the other of beginning the war. As of September 28th 2022, 63 Kyrgyz individuals had died and 195 had been injured, according to official figures from Kyrgyzstan.²⁵

Furthermore, 136,770 individuals were evacuated to secure regions, according to the press office of Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Emergency

²⁴ Cian Stryker, *"Importing Chinese Surveillance Technology: Are Central Asian States on the Path to Digital Authoritarianism?"*, PhD diss., (2022).

²⁵ Luca Urciuolo, "Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Causes and Analysis of an endless border dispute." *Special Eurasia*, (September 29, 2022). Available at: <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/09/29/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-borders/> (accessed December 10, 2022).

Situations. On the other hand, the Tajik government said that 74 people perished in the armed battle along the Kyrgyzstan border.²⁶ A significant portion of the fighting is concentrated on Vorukh, a Tajik exclave that is encircled by Kyrgyz territory along a hilly border that is still mostly under lineated.

The long-standing disagreement over the boundaries became a major reason of the war. Due to the violent situation of both states many clashes erupted in the region which became a reason of loss of huge number of people. Despite the frequent conflicts of varied sizes and intensities along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, it appears that Tajikistan was acting aggressively toward Kyrgyzstan in this instance. It appeared to be a purposeful and planned Tajik military action based on the sheer size of the operation, the quantity of heavy military equipment, and the number of army personnel. The fact that Tajikistan targeted civilian infrastructure in indisputable Kyrgyzstan's territory, far from the Kyrgyz-Tajik boundary, distinguishes this episode from earlier border conflicts. The provincial capital of Batken, which is unquestionably Kyrgyz territory and is only 10 kilometres from the border, was apparently shelled. Untargeted shelling suggests that evicting civilians from the area may be the intention.

There are several possible explanations for why Tajikistan launched an armed attack on Kyrgyzstan at this time, even though it may be too early to draw any analytical conclusions. More than 150 disputes over resource access and use between border towns in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over the past ten years have been documented between the two nations.

A further reason for the dispute is the usage of water resources. Nearly 40 channels are shared by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.²⁷ Some of these rivers have their sources in Kyrgyzstan and travel from there to Tajikistan and vice versa. Numerous farmers in Kyrgyzstan claim that Tajiks living upstream of the river use excessive amounts of water, leaving less for Kyrgyz farmers downstream. In response, groups of Tajiks further downstream gripe about a lack of water entering their regions. Every year, between April and June, when irrigation is taking place, a conflict emerges.

The Kyrgyz-Tajik border's present deteriorating water infrastructure makes the problem worse. This is due to the fact that some of the hydraulic facilities are in a trans-boundary area that is not under the control of the Tajik or Kyrgyz states. Since there is no specific institution, pact, or law governing reparations, neither of these nations wishes to invest in the field. As a result, a large amount of water cannot be used for agriculture.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Jeremy Allouche, "The governance of Central Asian waters: national interests versus regional cooperation." *In Disarmament Forum*, 4(1),(2007), 45-55.

3. Ineffective Leadership

When a vigorous Kyrgyz response replicated Tajikistan's military moves, the situation eventually became more tensed. At the 22nd Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit 2022 in Samarkand both presidents reaffirmed their commitment for using diplomacy to resolve any issues.²⁸ Additionally, it appears that they missed a crucial chance to defuse the crisis at the outset, continuing a tradition of ineffective leadership on both sides when resolving the unmarked portions of the Kyrgyz-Tajik boundary.

The Kyrgyz administration made populist actions before to the escalation regarding border control and the settlement of territorial disputes. In the late 2020 parliamentary elections, Kamchybek Tashiev, the head of the State Committee for National Security, and Japarov ran on platforms of territorial sovereignty and border security. The Sadyr Japarov administration replaced outdated Russian UAZ, off-road vehicles that were easily penetrated by gunshots, with a few Turkish Bayraktar drones and Russian "Tiger" armoured personnel carriers after being elected in early 2021. In August 2021, the government decided to have a military parade in the capital to show off its new acquisitions. Some of the weaponry was later moved to the border region.²⁹

Additionally, boasting about their ability to quickly resolve border conflicts with Tajikistan, government representatives may have been relying on their ability to successfully resolve border problems with Uzbekistan. The Tajik side of the border has long been militarised by the regime. With regard to Afghanistan, Tajikistan has recently gotten a lot of military training and assistance, notably from Chinese, Russian, Iranian, and American personnel. The launch of a facility to manufacture tactical drones with Iranian design, Ababil-2, is the most recent endeavour in this regard.³⁰ This escalation implies that, as several media sources and pundits have done, using the vocabulary of "boundary conflict" or "border skirmish" to describe what have occurred obscures rather than clarifies it. The two presidents have spoken about border concerns before, but those discussions have taken place on a number of occasions and at different levels without leading to any concrete answers. When identifying the root causes of an unresolved border dispute between these two nations, it is important to consider that the only Soviet-era leader in Central Asia whose authority is concentrated on

²⁸ "The SCO Summit in Samarkand" Middle East Institute. November 1, 2022. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/sco-summit-samarkand-reviving-iran-and-uzbekistan-relations-oil-and-transit-axis> (accessed on April 10, 2023).

²⁹ *Special Eurasia. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: causes and analysis of an endless border dispute* (2022), Available at: <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/09/29/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-borders/> (accessed December 20, 2022).

³⁰ Jim Nichol, "Tajikistan: Recent Developments and US Interests," (Washington DC: Library of Congress Congressional Research Service, 2009).

developing Tajik nationalism is the president of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon.³¹

During the SCO summit in Samarkand on 16 September 2022, Japarov and Rahmonov met at the side-lines. Both of them showed concerns over the tensions and "agreed to establish a commission to investigate the causes of the armed incident and instructed the co-chairs of the Intergovernmental Commission on the Delimitation and Demarcation of the State Border to intensify its work, including the activities of working groups on topographic and legal issues,"³² according to a statement posted on the website of the president of Tajikistan. They also agreed to resolve all the conflicts and tensions through diplomatic and peaceful means. Both also pledged to cooperate with each other in future.

In a time of extreme tension and instability in the post-Soviet region, there are also merely political justifications for analysing the causes of the war. There are rumours that Tajik President Rahmon intends to transfer power to his son Rustam Emomal, who is presently the parliament's speaker.³³ A brief, successful battle that demonstrates regime stability is typically necessary for such a succession process. Rahmon may also want to divert domestic and foreign audiences' attention from the outcome of the tenacious and rebellious protests in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), which is home to the Pamiri minority.³⁴

Deadly Clashes

The 970-kilometer border between two of the poorest former Soviet republics is still not completely defined. Border disputes in Central Asia are mostly a result of Moscow's attempts to split the region into various ethnic groups, whose settlements were frequently mixed in with those of other tribes. The security forces on both sides have been actively engaged over the past few weeks amid ongoing shelling, deadly clashes amongst local communities, and incessant shelling. Families are being uprooted and resettled in Kyrgyzstan's Batken area. Out of the 5, 50,000 or more residents of the Batken region, around 1, 50,000 have either fled the area or have been evacuated by the government, according to the Kyrgyzstani Ministry of

³¹ Dagikhudo Dagiev, *Regime Transition in Central Asia: Stateness, Nationalism and Political Change In Tajikistan And Uzbekistan*, (Routledge, 2013).

³² "Meeting with President of the Kyrgyz Republic Sadyr Japarov", (17th September 2022). Available at: <https://mfa.tj/en/london/view/11021/meeting-with-president-of-the-kyrgyz-republic-sadyr-japarov>

³³ "Tajik Election Law Changes Seen Favoring President's Son", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, (February 07, 2018). Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-election-law-changes-favor-rahmon-son/29025237.html> (accessed November 21, 2022).

³⁴ Steven Parham, "The bridge that divides: local perceptions of the connected state in the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan–China borderlands," *Central Asian Survey* 35(3) (2016): 351-368.

Emergency Situations.³⁵ Old pre- and post-Soviet legacies are being re-enacted in the contemporary conflicts.

Recent Developments

Over 100 people have died in border battles between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over the past week, at least 37 of them civilians, four of them children.³⁶ The fighting apparently started on September 14 when border guards from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan fired at one another along a contentious section of the border. Fighting has impacted civilian populations in at least a dozen communities on both sides of the widely undefined boundary between the two countries, with hundreds more injured.

According to statements made by Kyrgyz officials and published in the media, several residences in the Ak-Sai hamlet in Kyrgyzstan were intentionally torched and pillaged, and more than 300 civilian buildings, including markets and schools, were damaged or destroyed during conflicts. Authorities in Kyrgyzstan claim that around 137,000 people were forced to flee and either staying with relatives in the southwest Kyrgyz provinces of Batken and Osh or in 53 schools that have been turned into temporary shelters.³⁷

There have not been any reports of government-led evacuation attempts there, despite claims made by Tajik authorities that numerous civilian homes have been torched there and that a large number of individuals who have been critically injured are being treated in hospitals in the bordering Sughd region.

Both nations have accused one another of employing weaponry, such as Grad rockets and Bayraktar armed drones, to attack populous areas and infrastructure that supports the civilian population, killing civilians in the process. Similar confrontations in late April 2021 resulted in the deaths of nearly 50 persons on both sides, the majority of whom were civilians, hundreds of injuries, and the forced emigration of about 58,000 people. The reported deployment of explosive weapons with wide area impacts in populated areas, the claimed deliberate burning of homes and marketplaces, the destruction of schools and other civilian infrastructure, and these actions could all be considered violations of the rules of war. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan should look into their own role in civilian deaths and property damage, hold those guilty accountable, and offer suitable relief to people. In order to guarantee that civilians, including those who have been internally displaced, have adequate protection, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's

³⁵ Nasir Aliyev Tayfur, "Kyrgyzstan declares state of emergency in Batken region bordering Tajikistan." *Asia-Pacific* (September 17, 2022). Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/kyrgyzstan-declares-state-of-emergency-in-batken-region-bordering-tajikistan/2687523> (accessed November 29, 2022).

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

international allies, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), should get in touch with both governments right away.

Role of Russia and CSTO

Kyrgyzstan is a strategic ally of Russia and a member of Russian led associations such as CIS, Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Nevertheless, it followed a multi-vector foreign policy where it wants to have good relations with all the regional and global players. One reflection of this policy is Kyrgyz President Sadyr Zhaparov's neutral position in Russian-Ukraine conflict. Being a relatively democratic country, civil society in Kyrgyzstan is strong and is primarily funded by the West.

The civil society is always critical to governmental policies that are considered against the Russian interests in the country. It is assumed by the researchers that regimes in Bishkek are generally pro-Moscow which help later to exert its influence over the former.³⁸ Despite of the fact, Kyrgyz dependence on Russia to ensure her security cannot be denied. Russian led CSTO issued statement about its concerns over the war and asserted ceasefire following the talks and also stressed on the use of force in case conflict resolution effort fails.³⁹ Furthermore, CSTO facilitated telephonic talks between the Security Council Secretaries of the belligerent states. It was expressed by the parties that conflict should be resolved through peaceful means.

After a month, Kyrgyzstan defence minister Baktybek Bekbolotov proposed CSTO to deploy a peacekeeping troop as a third party mediator. He clearly stated that peace between the belligerent states is only possible through third party mediation. Tajikistan's willingness is prerequisite for CSTO as a mediator because the charter says mediator is chosen by the mutual consent of the belligerent states. Furthermore, the CSTO hasn't yet created a method to address comparable issues.

Russia-Central Asia summit was held in Astana during October 2022 for the very first time for regional cooperation.⁴⁰ In a joint statement, leadership pledged to continue the six-party cooperation to ensure regional security. SCO summit in Samarkand was attended by both Kyrgyz and Tajik

³⁸ Kanykey Jaiobaeva, "NGOs in Kyrgyzstan," (ETH Zurich). Available at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/145092/kanykei2_eng.pdf (accessed November 23, 2023).

³⁹ "Why Russia and China aren't intervening in Central Asia," *Foreign Policy*, (October 4, 2022). Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/04/tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-russia-china-intervention-central-asia/> (accessed November 20, 2022).

⁴⁰ Burc Eruygur, "Central Asia-Russia Summit in Astana discuss regional cooperation," (Anadolu Agency, October 14, 2022). Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/central-asia-russia-summit-in-astana-discuss-regional-cooperation/2712066> (accessed November 10, 2022).

presidents and they discussed the matter at side lines but it was not an agenda point for the Summit.⁴¹ CSTO has not been very active in conflict resolution in the past intraregional territorial disputes. However, this time it offered its mediatory role particularly in the wake of Russia's war with Ukraine.

The armed battle began on the same day that China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan inked a long-awaited deal in Samarkand to build a train connecting these nations that would create a faster path to Europe while avoiding sanctions-hit Russia. Thus, conflict along the Tajik and Kyrgyz borders, according to some Kyrgyz authorities, would serve as a warning about Russia's unhappiness, which has attempted to make the Central Asian countries as economically dependent as possible throughout their history. As a result, Tajik armies would attack Kyrgyzstan with Putin's backing.

There are concerns that Kyrgyzstan's neutral stance on the conflict in Ukraine might engender resentment in Moscow and possibly led to Russia backing to Tajikistan. Although, Tajik president Emomali Rehmon indirectly showed concerns to Putin on Moscow's war with Ukraine, there is an impression in Bishkek that Dushanbe supports Moscow's stance over Ukraine conflict. Russian involvement in Ukraine war is major reason for Moscow's little interest in Central Asia for the time being. It fails to perform the role of "big brother" this time.

On the other hand, Russian officials like State Dum'sa deputy Alexey Chepa, believes that external forces, especially Russia's adversaries are behind instability in the region. They say the adversaries have chosen to use the circumstance and foment instability in the area by using Tajikistan's internal issues and the conflict with Afghanistan. Conflicts in the region are used to damage the Russian prestige and reputation across the world in general and Central Asia in particular. Overall, it seems that Moscow is neither ready to intervene nor has the capacity to resolve this conflict.

Impact of the Conflict on the Region

Although the issue has not yet been resolved, on September 25, 2022, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan agreed to demilitarise a portion of their shared border that had been affected by war.⁴² The entire Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is facing trouble and instability as a result of the hostilities between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and Russia and Ukraine. The former Soviet Union's member states are all watching the ongoing upheaval of the established order with uncertainty and worry.

Apart from this clash there are several other reasons undoubtedly that are diminishing the effect of Russian influence in the region such as NATO's interest of expansion creates a constant competition for Russian

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Op cit.

engagement in the region. In case Russia does not persuade, other powers are ready to fill the gap notably China, India and United States. Particularly India and China both maintained their relations with post Soviet Central Asian republics and even in recent years diversified the measures of these connections through investments in development and energy projects. All these developments grabbed Russia's attention during past several years and Russia became ignorant for any settlement of the clash under consideration in this study. Security situation of the region has been changed because of this inter-state conflict that was comparatively stable earlier, a threat perception turned into a real threat. Moreover, magnitude of the conflict is higher than ever before due to the involvement of military and use of heavy weapons from both sides. This conflict changed the regional order and urges for a need to establish confidence building measures through adopting conflict resolution mechanisms not only by the belligerent states but also by the neighbours. There are several possible impacts of the conflict. One of them is the creation of an opportunity for Russia to play a role as a regional hegemon to pacify the situation or even increase of Russian military presence. Presidents of other countries like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan also offered their mediatory role that shows their willingness to keep Russia out of it and resolve this conflict on regional level.⁴³ A possible future scenario out of this conflict may be China's growing role in the region. Recent China plus Central Asian states summit is one of the reflections.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan frequently sees clashes of all sizes and intensities, but this war is unprecedented in the 31 years of Central Asian independence. This war has exposed inability of Russia to guarantee the security of the region as well as conflict mitigation if not resolution. It is also evident that Russia's influence in the region has vanished to a large extent. Central Asian states look towards alternatives to strengthen their security. One viable option is China.

Since, all the Central Asian states give priority to the region, they must think on serious lines to develop a mechanism for conflict resolution, especially border and water conflicts. There must be positive interventions to strengthen cooperation, increase resource management capacity building, encourage effective inter-ministerial coordination, improve independent monitoring systems, and involve local stakeholders. Both states must adopt an intergovernmental agreement to specify property rights for using and accessing pasture and water resources.

⁴³ "Conflict in the Kyrgyz-Tajik border- a potential turning point." *CASIAN Analyst*, (May 2022). Available at: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13672-conflict-in-the-kyrgyz-tajik-border-%E2%80%93-a-potential-turning-point-for-central-asia.html> (accessed on April 22, 2023).

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