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## An Absence of Diplomacy: The Kyrgyz-Uzbek Border Dispute

The Kyrgyz-Uzbek border has rarely been tranquil, but the latest escalation is significant.

By Cholpon Orozbekova  
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On March 18, Uzbekistan deployed troops and military equipment, including armored vehicles and trucks, to the unmarked area of Chalasart on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, closing the Madaniyat highway checkpoint on the border with Kyrgyzstan and restricting the entry of Kyrgyz citizens at the Dostuk highway checkpoint.

It is not the first time Uzbekistan has resorted to radical measures on the border with Kyrgyzstan. This time, the Uzbek national security service explained it as a routine reinforcement due to the Nowruz public holiday. Kyrgyz authorities immediately responded by sending troops and military equipment to the disputed area, and also sent a diplomatic note to Tashkent. Panic was reported among locals living in Kyrgyz villages near the occupied zone, and protests ensued.

After receiving a second diplomatic note from Bishkek, Uzbek border authorities called for a negotiation, which was held on March 25. After day-long talks, on March 26 Uzbekistan withdrew troops from the contested area. Still, questions linger. No clear indication was given as to whether a long-term understanding had been reached, suggesting that the problem has not been resolved. It is likely, then, that the standoff and clashes will continue.

Kyrgyzstan has managed to resolve border issues with China and Kazakhstan, but the majority of the twisting 1,314 kilometer-long Uzbek-Kyrgyz border remains undefined. The 58 unmarked segments of the border territories that remain have become a source of violent incidents, and several flare-ups in recent years have ended in fatal shootings. More broadly, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have signally failed at dialogue and diplomacy over the years, and tensions between the neighbors have become routine.

### **‘Eternal Friendship’?**

In 1997, Kyrgyzstan’s first president, Askar Akaev, and his Uzbek counterpart Islam Karimov signed a “treaty of eternal friendship.” Yet relations between the two countries never improved. Instead, clashes with border guards, hostage-taking and other incidents became the norm. Dozens of reports exist online of shootings involving border guards. Meanwhile, troubles persist in Sokh and Shohimardon, both Uzbek enclaves surrounded entirely by Kyrgyz territory, and in Barack, a Kyrgyz exclave encircled by Andijan Region, Uzbekistan.

The ISCIP Analyst wrote in 2009 that Karimov had become convinced that then Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev lacked the competence to control his own country, whether the issue was border safety, illegal grain trading, or hydropower. “Karimov’s conviction that Bakiev is unable to keep order in his own house could be one explanation for the Uzbek security forces’ occasional forays into villages on Kyrgyz territory, where they proceed to raid the residents’ houses, ostensibly as part of a security check.”

However, many experts agree that cooperation with Central Asia’s poorest states – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – has hardly been a priority for official Tashkent. In fact, Islam Karimov frequently pays official visits to both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, two states with vast natural resources. The Uzbek leader visited Ashgabat in December 2015, following earlier trips in 2014 and 2012, and has traveled to Kazakhstan many times in recent years. However, Karimov has not paid an official visit to Bishkek or Dushanbe in the last eight to ten years.

Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan haven’t even dispatched delegations at the ministerial level. Ravshan Jeenbekov, a Kyrgyz opposition politician, told *The Diplomat* that the crisis on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border is the outcome of a lack of dialogue. “The leadership of our country has failed to build a dialogue with Uzbekistan not only on border issues, but on every single problem. Our relationship is like as we were at war,” Jeenbekov said.

Tashpulat Yuldashev, a prominent Uzbek political scientist and dissident currently living in the US, told Azattyk radio, the Kyrgyz Service of RFE/RL that Islam Karimov’s policy towards poor states with smaller populations has always been hegemonic. He said that Karimov had resolved all border disputes with Kazakhstan, because Kazakhstan is able to compete with Uzbekistan in terms of its economy and natural resources. In contrast, Islam Karimov and Kyrgyz President Almaz Atambayev have encountered each other only on the sidelines of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Commonwealth of Independent States summits, where tensions are often on display.

These tensions can partly be blamed on political differences between the two countries. Uzbekistan's Karimov is one of the brutal dictators in the world. On May 13, 2005, just after the March revolution in Kyrgyzstan and fearing that the same thing would happen in his country, Karimov ordered a crackdown that killed hundreds of protesters in Andijan. Eleven years after the Andijan massacre, Islam Karimov is still in the power and fear still hangs over the people of Uzbekistan. Nobody can imagine rallies, free media or opposition meetings in Uzbekistan, whereas they have become quite commonplace in neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

## **No Muscle, Please**

In February 2015, Oxford Analytica brief published an analysis of the military capabilities of Central Asian states. According to the analysis, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are leading other states in the region in increased spending on military and security forces and the procurement of modern equipment. The Uzbekistan military is the second most capable in Central Asia, after Kazakhstan's. Its total annual defense budget is approximately 2 billion dollars and the Uzbek army currently boasts 45,000 personnel. Military experts and political scientists cite the relative military strength of Uzbekistan as a factor that gives it the confidence to act boldly in inter-state relations.

According to Kyrgyz military expert Murat Beishenov, Uzbekistan each year spends billions of dollars on its army and likes to show off its muscle to Kyrgyzstan. "Border disputes can never be solved by military action, only by negotiations supported by the political will of national leaders," Beishenov said at a roundtable held in Bishkek on March 26.

Edil Osmonbekov, a Kyrgyz political scientist, said that "Uzbekistan has maintained the same position for the past 25 years. It shows its muscles periodically to remind Kyrgyzstan of its military capability. Tashkent wants to demonstrate its military predominance and it never admits that it started the escalation. Uzbekistan never complies with international norms and also never pays attention to the reactions of international organizations."

Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev was blunt in responding to the latest border incident, describing the situation as "tense and unfriendly." He noted that in the past Uzbekistan had threatened to cut gas supplies to Kyrgyzstan in the middle of harsh winters, but that Karimov had now lost this leverage. Atambayev was referring here to the recent gas agreement with Russia's GazProm, which guarantees sustained gas supplies. Speaking on the anniversary of the 2005 revolt, Atambayev declared that "Kyrgyzstan never will be on its knees before its neighbors. Our people say that if the air would be coming from Uzbekistan, they could have cut off the air too for us."

Speaking with *The Diplomat*, Alikbek Jekshenkulov, formerly of Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, urged both sides to keep a lid on emotions. "Karimov should understand that although the Uzbek Army is the most capable, the Kyrgyz people have a strong soul. That is how we made two revolutions ousting two dictators. In today's fragile world, where wars and contracted conflicts are deepening, third forces will seek to use this situation to destabilize Fergana valley. I hope that both Kyrgyz and Uzbek presidents understand own responsibility that they should build dialogue in the sake of peace and eliminate tensions."

## Water Wars

Kyrgyzstan controls one third of Central Asia's water sources. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Karimov tends to view border issues with Kyrgyzstan through the prism of water and energy. In 2012, during an official visit to Astana President Karimov warned about water wars in Central Asia. Indeed, the Uzbek farmers in villages are ready to kill each other over water, as Uzbekistan is located downriver of the region's water supplies and lacks irrigation capacity for its agriculture.

Emil Juraev, a lecturer in politics at the American University of Central Asia, told IWPR that the recent Uzbek move was about Uzbekistan's water needs. Juraev said that Atambayev had chosen to champion the cause of energy independence, a strategy that has irritated Tashkent. Kyrgyzstan plans to build the Kambarata-3 Hydro Power Plant to produce hydro-energy for export to neighboring states, which will give Kyrgyzstan significant leverage over Uzbekistan. However, Tashkent strongly opposes this project, worrying that Kambarata will limit or disrupt the flow of irrigation water essential to its cotton fields and farmers.

The last military deployment may also be connected with Uzbekistan's keen interest in the 165 million cubic meter Orto-Tokoy water reservoir. Completed in 1954, the reservoir is located in Kyrgyzstan but was built using Uzbek resources. This was the Soviet era, and Kyrgyzstan had allocated 660 hectares of land for the construction of this reservoir at Moscow's behest, which had recognized the growing importance of the cotton industry to the Soviet economy. Kurbanbay Iskandarov, the Kyrgyz state representative on border affairs, told the Kloop news agency that Tashkent has repeatedly claimed it has rights to its waters.

The rational decision for all post-Soviet neighbors is entrenched in the agreement signed in 1992 just after the collapse of the Soviet Union. All neighboring states signed this agreement, which stipulates that each country has the right to all entities and facilities built on its land. According to Iskandarov, the Kyrgyz government representative on border affairs says that Uzbekistan should comply with this agreement and not claim it has the right to something built on the Kyrgyz land.

Uzbekistan needs water. To get it, it needs the help of its neighbors. That it turn requires dialogue-building and diplomacy, with poor countries as well as rich. Military muscle has its uses, protecting against external security threats, and from new emerging threats such as terrorism and extremism, but some issues require diplomacy.

In 2010, Karimov's carefully considered and evenhanded position during the bloody 2010 ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan showed wisdom. His position was balanced and reasonable. When it comes to inter-state relations with Kyrgyzstan the most recent standoff on the border makes clear that he needs a new approach to Kyrgyzstan, and that he should change his hegemonic behavior. Atambayev has made clear that he is not going to be deferential – showing muscle is not going to work anymore. It is time for two leaders to sit down and negotiate. Only diplomacy and dialogue will solve this issue.

