Water Conflicts in Central Asia and Russia's Position

The inter-state disputes over the nature of trans-boundary water resources, which have not ceased for more than 20 years, represent a threat to the security of Central Asian countries. Yet, all the attempts at international and regional levels to find a way out of these difficult situations have failed miserably. There is a joke in Central Asia that refers to the researchers working on water issues in the region. They say that if every researcher would just bring a bucket of water, instead of writing about the subject, then the problem would be solved.

Conflicts over water in the region have aggravated since the late 1990s. It became apparent that the old, established in Soviet times and ratified by a 1992 Agreement, system of distribution of water resources, when the bulk of water from the upper basin is used by the lower basin countries, had ceased to meet the needs of economic development in the region. Thus the compensatory mechanism, underlying this system, does not work in the current regional market economy.

The difficulty lies in the fact that 80% of all freshwater resources in Central Asia are owned by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Their economic interests are associated with the use of hydroelectric power potential of the trans-boundary rivers Amu Darya and Syr Darya, in the absence of alternative sources of domestic energy. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are primarily interested in the use of the waters of these rivers for irrigation, and therefore are opposed to hydroelectric power plans of their neighbours, which would have an impact on their own economic interests.

When the downstream countries began to raise prices on oil and gas supplied to the upstream countries in exchange for water, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan faced a choice – either to pay international prices for energy, which would be a heavy burden on their underdeveloped economies, or to develop their own hydropower. The choice was made in favour of the latter.

The interest of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the construction of large hydroelectric power plants (HPP) – Kambarata-2 HPP in Kyrgyzstan and Rogun HPP in Tajikistan – is dictated not only by economic interests (domestic energy needs and energy exports abroad). For many developing countries, including those mentioned above, the construction of HPPs becomes a political task to strengthen the national power and position of the ruling elites, giving legitimacy to regimes that lack authority in society. As the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, said – the Rogun HPP is a matter of life or death for Tajikistan, and this project will be implemented “at any cost”.

In the centre of the conflict, there were three countries – Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Unlike Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan is also interested in ensuring a stable flow of trans-boundary rivers but it has taken a more moderate position, not openly entering the conflict. Uzbekistan is doing the contrary. It is demonstrating its unwillingness to tolerate possible threats by using various methods in trying to influence the leadership of its neighbours (energy blockade, railway war, cold war).

What are Uzbekistan’s arguments when it opposes construction of the Rogun HPP in Tajikistan?

- economic – the water flow in the summer would be reduced by 18%, and in the winter, it would increase by 54%,
and this would flood the irrigated fields and worsen the water situation in the country. Economic losses are estimated at $20 billion.

- environmental - the project is being implemented in a seismically dangerous zone. Moreover, it would have a negative impact on the fate of the Aral Sea, something Uzbekistan points out.

Uzbekistan’s verbal accusations towards its neighbours hide this country’s anxiety that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan will be able unilaterally to control the flow of rivers, putting the downstream countries in a dependent position. It is quite possible that the water will become a means of putting political pressure. Therefore, Uzbekistan insists on a need for a mandatory approval of any HPP construction by all countries, located in trans-boundary river basins.

There is another hidden cause for Uzbekistan’s discontent when it comes to Tajikistan’s plans. The fact is that today, Tajikistan has a certain energy dependence on Uzbekistan. That is why, with the creation of its own energy industry, Tajikistan will be able to more strongly oppose the regional interests of Uzbekistan, which, judging by the President’s statement, does not exclude the probability of war.

All these facts create a complex and extremely unfavourable political situation for establishing international cooperation in the field of rights and obligations of each stakeholder, when it comes to the use of trans-boundary rivers.

As these countries are not able independently to solve the water problem in Central Asia, they hope that international mediation can become a guarantor of this region’s security.

The World Bank has actively joined in attempting to solve this issue. It is examining the economic feasibility of the Rogun HPP and evaluating its impact on the environment. At the same time, it is doubtful that under the intransigent attitudes of the presidents of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, they will agree with any arguments and recommendations of the World Bank. They made it clear that they would stay their courses regardless of the bank’s conclusions.

The Tajik government is placing its bets on the United States. They are trying to draw the attention of the United States, by emphasizing the country’s importance for the implementation of a “New Silk Road” strategy. Moreover, judging by the statements being made by the U.S. leadership, the Americans are not against participating in finding solutions to the conflicts in the region.

As for the European Union (EU), on the one hand, it is offering donor assistance to Central Asian countries in the implementation of water projects, but on the other hand, the EU policy is not directed towards the establishment of cooperation between these countries on the water issue. To the contrary, the EU is openly supporting Uzbekistan. According to Tajikistan, the EU support is explained by European plans for the implementation of the Nabucco gas pipeline project.

On February 2012, the European Union expressed its disapproval of a Russian $1.7 billion loan to Kyrgyzstan for construction of the Kambarata HPP, which can be regarded as an attempt to counter the growing influence of Russia in the region.

There is much evidence that the lower basin countries see an ally in Russia. This is explained first by the fact that Emomalii Rahmon turned to V. Putin with a request to assist in solving the conflict between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan, in its turn, is mainly expecting Russian investments into the creation of its modern hydroelectric complex.

Until recently, Russia remained aloof from the water issues in Central Asia. However, due to historical and geopolitical reasons, Russia cannot remain neutral on this problem in Central Asia. Of course, the country is interested in solving water conflicts that threaten its interests and national security. Besides this, the need to participate in solving the problems of energy and water use in Central Asia is caused by the increased activity and interest of other international players in this region (U.S.A., EU, China, Iran), which are offering their mediatory services and seeking to strengthen their positions in the region, driving Russia back.

Today, Russia’s interest in water resources of Central Asia is primarily associated with the use of their hydroelectric potential. However, there are many considerable risks in this very profitable activity – Russia is in the centre of an escalating rivalry between the countries of this region, vying for control of trans-boundary water resources.

It would be naive to believe that the Russian leadership is not aware of the political risks of becoming involved in this water conflict. As early as 2009, when the topic of Russia’s large loan to Kyrgyzstan, in exchange for a 50% stake in
the project appeared, the Uzbek leaders did not hide their displeasure. Nevertheless, they did not enter into open confrontation with Russia.

As for Russia, it initially avoided collision with Uzbekistan. It is worth remembering that Russia, represented by the private company ROSAL, wanted the Rogun HPP project in Tajikistan revised. This attitude was explained by the potential consequences on the countries located in the lower basin. Moreover, during a visit to Tajikistan in October 2012, V. Putin announced Russia’s intention to invest into smaller hydroelectric power projects, which would not threaten the economic and environmental interests of neighbouring countries.

Speaking about the main facility – the Kambarata HPP, the Russian president, during his visit to Kyrgyzstan in 2012, clearly stated that Russia's participation in this project is not directed against any country and it is interested in such cooperation on the control and distribution of water resources, which takes into account the interests of all stakeholders. Moreover, he added that the building of hydroelectric power projects is only possible with the participation of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Besides this, it was Russia that expressed a desire to have an international organization assess the project and that it opposed offering Uzbekistan the right to veto this project, in case of a positive assessment.

Nevertheless, the current conflict between countries has another component - the very inefficient use of water resources in irrigation and hydroelectric power generation, which contributes to water deficiencies and increased competition for water between the countries, in the context of growing populations.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan see a way for providing their countries with water by using Russia's water potential and in the resuscitation of the water transference from Western Siberia project. However, this kind of water supply would be just another manifestation of the already excessive dependence on raw materials, and thus deprive Russia of its stimulus to the development of modern resource-saving technologies, promising considerable profits. Russia is able to assist Central Asian countries in overcoming their water crisis through the provision of financial and technical assistance in their transition to resource conservation. This would be conducive to further promotion of investments and equipment on their markets.

At the political level, Russia’s participation in the settlement of interstate disputes involving trans-boundary water usage should be aimed at the signing multilateral agreements on mutually acceptable modes of water use, which corresponds to its position as an investor and business partner in Central Asia. According to United Nations Development Program, the economic benefits of cooperation in the region, in the field of water resources, is estimated at 5% of the regional Gross Domestic Product.

However, since the prospect of a water usage agreement between countries is not expected, in a situation where major policy decisions in the Central Asian countries are taken at the highest level, much will depend on Russia’s performance as a diplomatic mediator, including negotiations between heads of state.

The problem of trans-boundary water resources goes beyond the scope of a purely resource issue, and is largely political in nature. This problem is determined by the complex nature of relations between the countries of Central Asia, and primarily between their political elites, their unwillingness to make concessions, their national egoism, which is fuelled by political rivalry of these countries, living in conditions of political and economic instability.

Nevertheless, certain optimism about the water situation in Central Asia is being preserved. This optimism is explained by the fact that, as history shows, water conflicts eventually become solved. Moreover, the path to solving these problems is through cooperation and economic integration.

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