



End the Weaponisation of Water in Central Asia

Four Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – have argued over their water resources since the collapse of the Soviet Union. At times these disputes have seemed to threaten war. The forthcoming presidential summit in Astana can help banish that spectre.

On 15-16 March there is a landmark opportunity to promote peace and prosperity in Central Asia when the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan meet in the Kazakh capital of Astana. It will be the four leaders' first summit in nearly a decade. A top agenda item will likely be the precious water resources the countries must share in this vast region.

Water has been at the heart of recurrent disputes among the four states since the demise of the Soviet Union. At root, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are short on water, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan short on electricity. The tension has been sharpest in the densely populated Ferghana Valley, where Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan converge. The latter two states accused their larger Uzbek neighbour of guzzling river water to irrigate vast cotton fields; Uzbekistan, for its part, bitterly fought Kyrgyz and Tajik plans to build dams upstream. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan also argued over the hydropower projects, which Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan needed to keep the lights on. At various times, shared resources have been used as a political tool – Uzbekistan by switching off power grids, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan by threatening to block the downstream flow of water.

A breakthrough occurred in 2017, when Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan agreed to develop

hydroelectric power plants on the Naryn river, which feeds the Syr Darya traversing Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan toward the Aral Sea. Another positive sign was Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's 9 March announcement in Dushanbe, the Tajik capital, that he now backs the Rogun dam and hydroelectric project in Tajikistan. In Astana, Mirziyoyev and his peers, Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan and Sooronbai Jeenbekov of Kyrgyzstan, can reiterate and expand upon these commitments. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan should help Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan develop their hydro-power capacity, and all four countries should reach an agreement as to when water will be stored and released. These accords may be hard to negotiate but now is the time to start.

In 2018, all four states should also coordinate efforts to improve irrigation infrastructure in border areas, where there is some risk of renewed local conflict over water, particularly in the Ferghana Valley. Kyrgyzstan especially stands to benefit, as cross-border conflict with Uzbekistan has in the past undermined the credibility of the central government.

All states should affirm in Astana that national agencies and local governments along borders will develop complementary work plans to ensure equitable access to irrigation. Presidential leadership on this issue is vital

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given the top-down nature of governance in the region. For more than two decades, the ability of locals to work together at the borders has dwindled. Technicians and engineers who worked together during the Soviet era have left the work force. Meanwhile, quarrels between the capitals stifled local initiative.

With political will at the top, however, it is possible to forestall future disputes. Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek water management officials in border areas should convene bilaterally and trilaterally to identify potential sites of conflict over water. Their work should be framed as technical, not political, and the presidents should encourage it publicly. Where possible, officials in the Ferghana Valley should pool resources and machinery. Irrigation infrastructure is in poor repair and needs modernisation – but even what exists can be made more efficient with timely maintenance. Inspectors should be free to cross borders as needed.

The upstream countries should plan maintenance work on reservoirs carefully and transparently to avoid any perception that they are ignoring downstream needs or making an oblique political point.

The Astana meeting could be a defining moment for President Mirziyoyev, if he distances himself from his predecessor, Islam Karimov, who warned that water disputes

could lead to war when he visited Astana in 2012. Mirziyoyev’s trip to Dushanbe suggests he has an entirely different vision. As a downstream country, Uzbekistan can secure the release of water for irrigation by buying more electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Doing so would also reduce Uzbekistan’s reliance on thermal power plants and move it toward renewable sources as domestic demand for electricity increases.

To date, deep-seated mistrust between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan has hindered cooperation, but progress such as the agreements on hydropower and the reopening of border crossings shows that the disputes are not intractable. What Central Asia needs now is a joint commitment, announced at the highest level, to end the weaponisation of water in both word and deed. Should the presidents take this stance, the comity would trickle down into society.