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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL - Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies



SICUREZZA, TERRORISMO E SOCIETÀ

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
Italian Team for Security,
Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies

16

ISSUE 2/2022

Milano 2022

EDUCATT - UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

SICUREZZA, TERRORISMO E SOCIETÀ

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL – Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies

ISSUE 2 – 16/2022

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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.7234.22.35 - fax 02.80.53.215
e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (produzione); librario.dsu@educatt.it (distribuzione)
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Associato all'AIE – Associazione Italiana Editori

ISSN: 2421-4442

ISSN DIGITALE: 2533-0659

ISBN: 978-88-9335-041-9

copertina: progetto grafico Studio Editoriale EDUCatt

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Renewed Kyrgyz-Tajik Border Conflict – Cui Bono?

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Abstract

Following the July 2022 4th Consultative Meeting of the heads of state of Central Asian Countries at the Lake Issyk-Kul, hosted by Kyrgyzstan, and literally on the eve of a high-level summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Samarkand, where among other agenda, the regional powerhouse Iran, so far active as an observer state, formally submitted an application to join the regional geopolitical organization increasingly aspiring to become a global one, and Turkey, an invited guest, announced its preparedness to join the alliance in the future, fierce fighting flared up in the Batken Region of Kyrgyzstan, following a military incursion from the side of Tajikistan. Not only were the presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan sitting around the same table sipping tea when young Kyrgyz soldiers were losing their lives defending their homeland, the whole idea behind the summit hosted by Uzbekistan was originally prepared to increase the regional cooperation perspectives, not to watch such efforts disintegrate before the very eyes of the Central Asian and wider regional nations. Moreover, in less than a week, the 77th United Nations General Assembly gathering was to take place, bringing to New York the leaders of the very nations embroiled in another round of Central Asian border conflict – compelling the Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov to dedicate his address entirely to the renewed border dispute with Tajikistan.

Obviously, with the ongoing Russia-Ukraine confrontation and the situation around the Nagorno-Karabakh recently aggravating to another level of military clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia, a question needs to be asked whether this new Kyrgyz-Tajik engagement is to be seen and analyzed on its own, or whether some other global mechanisms in the backdrop should be identified. The border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is certainly an issue in force for the past twenty years, having attained its very hot phase in April 2021, and a complex mix of causes needs to be addressed to understand the matter in question – from a lack of proper governance on both sides, decades long competition over water resources in the Fergana Valley, socioeconomic disparities in the geographical area far from their respective national capitals, proliferating organized crime including drug trafficking, and, not the least, the ever contrasting ethnic divide among the several nations of the region.

The article will put less emphasis on historical data and perspectives, while maintaining a certain measure of a chronological frame of reference, and instead will attempt to place the current Kyrgyz-Tajik border crisis into both regional context (as part of the ongoing phenomenon where currently all of the Central Asia gains significance among various global affairs) as well as the context of increasingly crucial global issues, including a proper use of water resources, food security and inter-ethnic symbiosis.

Dopo il 4° incontro consultivo dei capi di stato dei paesi dell'Asia centrale nel luglio 2022 presso il lago Issyk-Kul, ospitato dal Kirghizistan, e letteralmente alla vigilia di un vertice ad alto livello dell'Organizzazione per la cooperazione di Shanghai a Samarcanda, dove, tra l'altro, la potenza regionale Iran, finora attiva come stato osservatore, ha formalmente presentato domanda per entrare a far parte dell'organizzazione geopolitica regionale sempre più aspirante a diventare globale, e la Turchia, un ospite invitato, ha annunciato la sua disponibilità ad aderire all'alleanza in futuro, aspri combattimenti sono divampati nella regione di Batken del Kirghizistan, a seguito di un'incursione militare dalla parte del Tagikistan. Non solo i presidenti del Kirghizistan e del Tagikistan erano seduti intorno allo stesso tavolo a sorseggiare il tè quando i giovani soldati kirghisi stavano perdendo la vita per difendere la loro patria, l'intera idea alla base del vertice ospitato dall'Uzbekistan era originariamente preparata per aumentare le prospettive di cooperazione regionale, e non vedere tali sforzi disintegrarsi davanti agli occhi stessi delle nazioni dell'Asia centrale e della regione più ampia. Inoltre, in meno di una settimana, si sarebbe tenuta la 77a riunione dell'Assemblea Generale delle Nazioni Unite, portando a New York i leader delle stesse nazioni coinvolte in un altro round di conflitti di confine dell'Asia centrale, costringendo il presidente kirghiso Sadyr Japarov a dedicare interamente il suo discorso al rinnovato conflitto di confine con il Tagikistan.

Ovviamente, con il conflitto Russia-Ucraina in corso e la situazione intorno al Nagorno-Karabakh che si è recentemente aggravata a un altro livello di confronto militare tra Azerbaijan e Armenia, è necessario porsi una domanda se questo nuovo impegno kirghiso-tagiko debba essere visto e analizzato da solo, o se dovrebbero essere identificati altri meccanismi globali sullo sfondo. La disputa di confine tra Kirghizistan e Tagikistan è certamente una questione in vigore negli ultimi vent'anni, avendo raggiunto la sua fase molto calda nell'aprile 2021, e per comprendere la questione in questione è necessario affrontare un insieme complesso di cause – dalla mancanza di un buon governo da entrambe le parti, dalla concorrenza decennale per le risorse idriche in Val Fergana, disparità socioeconomiche nell'area geografica lontana dalle rispettive capitali nazionali, proliferazione della criminalità organizzata compreso il traffico di droga, e, non ultimo, la sempre contrastante divisione etnica tra le diverse nazioni della regione.

L'articolo porrà meno enfasi sui dati storici e sulle prospettive, pur mantenendo una certa misura di un quadro di riferimento cronologico, e cercherà invece di collocare l'attuale crisi del confine tra Kirghizistan e Tagikistan in entrambi i contesti regionali (come parte del fenomeno in corso in cui attualmente tutta l'Asia centrale acquista importanza tra i vari affari globali) così come il contesto di questioni globali sempre più cruciali, tra cui un uso corretto delle risorse idriche, la sicurezza alimentare e la simbiosi interetnica.

Keywords

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Central Asia, Regional Security, post-USSR Conflict Zone, Water Resources

1. Introduction – The 100-year Old Soviet Legacy Reflected in the Current Border Dispute

In order to understand the current border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which in September 2022 intensified in the form of open military incursions from the side of Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan, one needs to simply look at the regional map and perhaps make a short excursion into the history of the Soviet Union. As displayed in the map below, the three nation-states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are intertwined almost in a symmetric vortex around the fertile Fergana Valley, with the border delineation as if each of the countries was firmly embedded into the neighboring one. Furthermore, the existence of multiple exclaves (Sarvan – the Tajikistan exclave in Uzbekistan, Vorukh – the Tajikistan exclave in Kyrgyzstan, Kayragach – less than 1 km² Tajik exclave inside Kyrgyzstan, Shakhimardan – an Uzbekistan exclave in Kyrgyzstan, Sokh – another Uzbekistan exclave in Kyrgyzstan, Barak – a Kyrgyz exclave within the Uzbek province of Andijan, Chon-Qora – two Uzbek village exclaves in Kyrgyzstan, and similarly Jani-Ayil – an Uzbek exclave within Kyrgyzstan) makes the region difficult to navigate when it comes to determining which ethnic group controls the local lands. While the exclaves usually denote the predominance of the motherland ethnic group within the small territory inside its neighbor, there are also some anomalies, such as the Uzbek exclave of Sokh within the Batken Province of Kyrgyzstan, which is almost entirely populated by ethnic Tajiks with Uzbek citizenship. Apart from the complexities of the national exclaves, historically the Kyrgyz Osh Region (with the city of Osh – the second largest megalopolis in Kyrgyzstan) has been home to a large Uzbek diaspora (by percentage almost equal to that of local Kyrgyz population), and similarly the Samarqand Region in south-west Uzbekistan with its second largest city Samarkand is the home to ethnic Tajiks, who in fact count for 70% of the local population.

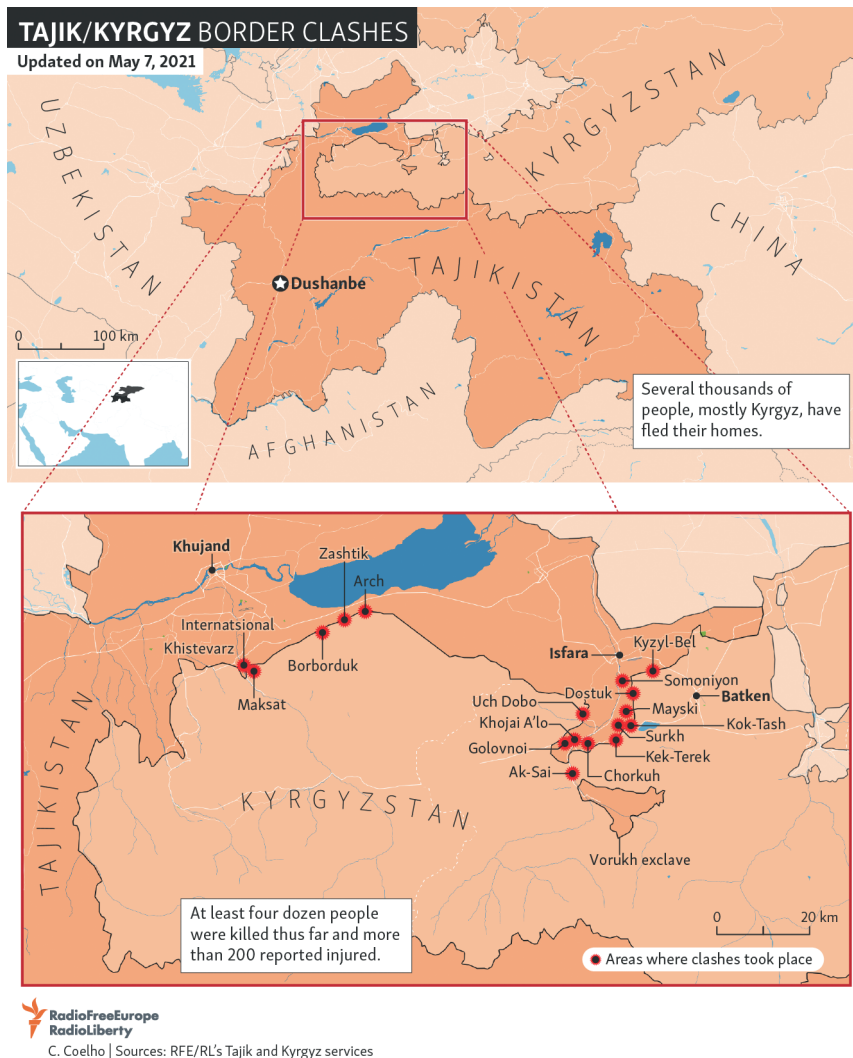
Rashid Gabdulhakov provides perhaps the most comprehensible overview of the Fergana Valley enclaves/exclaves, as well as the historical perspective on the reasoning around their original formation:

The emergence of Fergana Valley enclaves is usually explained via the assumption that during the formation of the USSR land units were allocated to a country based on the language spoken by its inhabitants. For instance, since the majority of the people in Barak village spoke Kyrgyz, the land unit was given to the administration of the Kyrgyz Republic, despite the fact that this land unit is located inside Uzbekistan. Border demarcation between the

“brotherly” Soviet republics was carried out in a manner that complicates border negotiations today.¹

Tajik-Kyrgyz border clashes as of May 2021.

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¹ Gabdulhakov R. (2021), Geographical Enclaves of the Fergana Valley: Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?, p. 2.

² <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/spiralling-violence-on-the-borders-in-the-fergana-valley>.

Separately from the issues of national exclaves, the existing road and utilities infrastructure in the border regions *de facto* transform some of the sovereign villages into pene-enclaves/pene-exclaves, where the local population needs to choose between physically using its own national services or for the purposes of convenience it would rely on the services of its neighboring country. A typical example can be drawn by looking at the functioning of a Kyrgyz village Dostuk close to the Tajik border – a Bishkek-based expert on border issues between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Asel Murzakulova, describes the situation clearly:

The only road through which the residents of Dostuk village could reach the administrative center of the District [= Kyrgyzstan], and the wider region, ran through Tajikistan's territory. Thus, Dostuk village was a peni-enclave: a territory that can only be accessed via the roads of the neighboring state. Dostuk village was not only dependent on Tajikistan's road infrastructure, but was also widely integrated into other infrastructures belonging to Tajikistan. For example, before 2003, the village was connected to Tajikistan's electricity system via Tajikistani electric lines, the only cell phone reception available for Dostuk village is provided by Tajikistani companies, and the irrigation and drinking water is supplied from Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstani television channels are not broadcast to the village, and the most accessible way to learn news of what is happening in the outside world is through media from Tajikistan.³

The gradual establishment of strict border posts between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan make it difficult for the local populace to tend to their livelihood – farming – as the cadastral delineations between the actual villages and the agricultural land belonging to the village population are disconnected from each other by the neighboring country territory:

Dostuk has limited agricultural land, only covering the basic household need for vegetables, not enough to produce crops for sale. During the privatization of land following independence, the collective farm employees each received 11 acres of land, and all the other villagers were allocated 8 acres each. Fields of Dostuk residents were, however, disconnected from the village because they were located beyond the neighboring Tajik village. To irrigate their fields nowadays, farmers from Dostuk either have to cross a border post and enter into Tajik territory, walking only 200 meters along an asphalt road, or if wishing or needing to stay within Kyrgyzstan, they must travel 15 km on a mountain road further in order to reach a water source. The choice was obvious, before border posts were erected next to the village.⁴

³ Murzakulova A. (2018), *Challenges of Social Cohesion and Tensions in Communities on the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border*, pp. 12-13.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 14.

The aforementioned border area idiosyncrasies between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have deep roots in the 1920's and early 1930's, when the process of a so-called national-territorial delimitation for the Soviet Central Asia was finalized and borders between then Soviet Socialist Republics were demarcated (for the discourse of Kyrgyz-Tajik relationship and their territorial division, the date of February 1924 – when the Soviet Central Committee commenced the process of final delineation – is usually referenced, hence in the minds of contemporary geopolitical experts it is 98-year history still in the making. The end of 1936 which saw a final form of border demarcation among the five Soviet Central Asian republics also laid foundation for 1991 inter-country border lines when the Soviet Union disintegrated.

The process in the period between the first two world wars that led to demarcation of sovereign borders among the countries of Central Asia is a complex one, and today's Kyrgyzstan was created only in 1936. In both its previous local precursors, the Kara-Kirghiz Autonomous Oblast (established in October 1924) and the Kirghiz Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (established in February 1926), the Kyrgyz national entity existed as part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Only in December 1936, after the adoption of the Soviet Constitution, it became a fully-fledged constituent of the Soviet Union – but the borders were not delineated along the ethnic or linguistic lines, and instead the intermixed form putting together the major regional ethnic groups – Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tajiks – remain to this day. As for the Tajik ethnic population of the area, they also feel unjustly “carved up” or “mixed in”, as the original Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, spanning from the shores of the Caspian Sea to China, was initially divided between Turkmen and Uzbek Soviet entities. The Tajik SSR was subsequently created from within the Uzbek SSR, to accommodate the Tajik (= non Turkic) population inhabiting the area, but the three regions dominantly populated by Tajiks – Samarkand, Bukhara and Surkhandarya – remained within the Uzbek SSR.

The individual historical milestones within the history of Kyrgyz-Tajik relations, be it during the Soviet Union or as part of past 30 years of independence of respective Central Asian republics notwithstanding, the current stalemate around the obvious unwillingness to conclude any permanent solutions to the problem highlights a broad spectrum of imminent concerns that need to be addressed on a micro-economic level before any all-inclusive peaceful resolution is achieved.

2. Kyrgyz-Tajik Conflict within the Last 30 years of Independence

In the wake of September 2022 border clashes, which during the first day reported 24 dead and 200 injured on the Kyrgyz side, with almost 150,000 local population fleeing the Batken Region towards the capital Bishkek, a former Kyrgyz Government official in a private conversation clearly stated that the conflict is about 98 years in the making (referring to the 1924 original USSR border delineation process) and that the issue can, must and will be resolved only within bilateral relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. He also categorically excluded any possibility of CSTO, OSCE, UN or even NATO intervening in the conflict or mediating it – the border issue has been set long before the existence of any of these regional or multinational organizations, and they have no right to be involved.⁵

Tajikistan on its part was too preoccupied most of the 1990's with her own bitter and devastating Civil War which essentially ended in a stalemate and Dushanbe is still not in full control of the Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region (or Gorno-Badakhshan, often abbreviated as GBAO). The status of the largest of the Tajik enclaves inside Kyrgyzstan, Vorukh, is much less consequential to the overall well-being of Tajikistan, compared to that of internal territorial issues, nevertheless in the renewed 2022 border conflict the enclave of Vorukh seems to be the focal point of the dispute, with reported objectives to link it territorially with “motherland” Tajikistan by a corridor.

The Batken Region where the enclave of Vorukh is located is a no stranger to clashes between the armed forces of Kyrgyzstan and external militant forces from the late 1990's – in a series of confrontations the members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) intruded into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan from the Tajik territory in summer 1999, the situation eventually witnessing the Uzbek armed forces joining their Kyrgyz counterparts in expelling the militants (the events collectively dubbed the “Batken Conflict”). While some of the radical elements retreated to Tajikistan, the incursion ended in both political and reputational fiasco for the Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz, with far reaching international implications when the Japanese government reportedly resolved to paying the ransom for a Japanese geologist abducted during the original incursion.⁶

⁵ By the account of S.B.B., a former Colonel in the Soviet KGB and Kyrgyz GKNB, who also participated in a Kyrgyz Government committee in 2000's on the border issue resolution with neighboring countries.

⁶ Details on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan with the instance of a Japanese national kidnapping are outlined in “Security Terrorism Society” No. 14 from November 2021, in the

While the Batken Conflict was not instigated by Tajikistan per se, it showcased the utilization of the Tajik territory as a safe haven for radicalized militants posing the threat to all neighbors, and also the fact that two years after the nominal end of the Tajik Civil War, the Government in Dushanbe was still not in control of many of its border territories. The Batken Region itself was created in October 1999 (by carving out the western Osh Region) as a response to the IMU incursion, and as one of the consequences, the Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations became strained, especially when the Uzbeks started to seal off the border area and openly declared their readiness to launch military operations into Kyrgyzstan if needed (ostensibly to preempt any future attacks from rebel hotbeds in the region).

Towards the end of April 2021, following the local Kyrgyz and Tajik residents' skirmishes around a water supply facility in Batken Region, the dispute quickly turned deadly with heavy military equipment used, leaving 55 casualties on both sides after the four days of infighting. Just with the September 2022 military clashes in the same region, occurring during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Samarkand, the April-May 2021 confrontation happened during a CSTO meeting of national Security Council Secretaries under the Tajikistan's chairmanship.

While the use of water resources for agricultural purposes was contested between the Kyrgyz and Tajik farmers in the Soviet era too, for the period prior to the most serious military clashes in 2021 and 2022, respectively, Kemel Toktomushev of the University of Central Asia in Bishkek recapitulates that:

In general, the years of independence for both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been marred by conflicts on the borders of their Batken and Sughd provinces, respectively (for instance, in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2015). Per some reports, in the period from 2011 to 2013, there were 63 incidents on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, ranging from small fights to hostage taking.⁷

3. The Blame-Game – a New Name of the Game?

While the original address to the United Nations General Assembly by the Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov was exclusively focused on sustainability issues surrounding high mountain economies, the actual speech delivered on September 20, 2022 in New York reflected almost exclusively the ongoing Kyr-

article "Regional Ramifications for Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan – Role and Position of Uzbekistan on Islamic Fundamentalism 1991-2021" by the author.

⁷ Toktomushev K. (2018), *Understanding Cross-Border Conflict in Post-Soviet Central Asia: The Case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*, p. 27.

gyz-Tajik relationship crisis.⁸ President Japarov briefed the General Assembly of historical milestones regarding mutual agreements among ex-Soviet republics since the Kyrgyz Republic gained independence in 1991, emphasizing those agreed upon with Tajikistan. For the April 2021 and September 2022 military incursions into the Kyrgyz territory by Tajik armed forces, Japarov placed the blame entirely on its neighbor. While further negotiations, using international intermediaries if needs be, are apparently a preferred method of the Kyrgyz leadership to resolve the issue, Japarov made it clear that Kyrgyzstan does not intend to surrender any of its sovereign territory.

The United Nations General Assembly address by the Tajikistan's representative, the Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin, delivered four days later, was more multi-lateral in nature, making a mention of terrorism in general, water security, climate issues. A great emphasis in the Foreign Minister's speech was put on the issue of Afghanistan. Referring to the nation as a "fallen state" and elaborating on multiple socio-economic issues, including lack of respect for basic human rights, emergence of new terrorist groupings vis-à-vis inept Taliban government, and essentially the country becoming a "new hotbed of tensions" near Central Asian nations' borders, the Minister demonstrated a possibility that Afghanistan is already on the path of Tajikistan in early 1990's when the Tajik nation entered a devastating Civil War.⁹

Only then the Tajik Minister turned to the question of the current border conflict with Kyrgyzstan, first criticizing the very address of the Kyrgyz President who raised the issue at the General Assembly. Continuing with further criticism of its neighbor for "deviating from the reached agreements", he actually openly accused Kyrgyzstan of being the aggressor in the ongoing dispute. While drawing some comparison to the Tajik-Chinese and Tajik-Uzbek border issues that have already been resolved, the Tajik representative concluded by referring to the 1924-27 Soviet era decisions on national-territorial delimitation as the only legal framework for further negotiations, giving some limited leeway to the Kyrgyz propositions made in 1989 as part of parity commission deliberations.

The former Member of the Kyrgyz Parliament and the country's Ombudsman, Dr. Toktokuchuk Mamytov, in a televised interview on September 19 focused on the many details of the September 14-16 border clashes that were either omitted in general media reporting, or were brought to the attention of the public only superficially. He underlined that the military

⁸ As per the Presidential Adviser in charge of Mountain Issues who personally notified the author on changes in the President's UN address.

⁹ Address by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan Sirojiddin Muhriddin at the General Debates of the 77th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, September 24, 2022, p. 5.

incursion from the side of Tajikistan could not have been spontaneous, but carefully prepared, citing the fact of an obvious mobilization of the Tajik armed forces. He also mentioned the presence of seasoned fighters (not the young conscripts that on the Kyrgyz side were called to arms to defend the territorial integrity) – apparently witnesses spoke of “older men, with long beards, in black military outfits not displaying clear marks of adhering to any particular national army”.¹⁰

Responding to a question why the losses on the Kyrgyz side were relatively heavy (more than 60 people dead on the Kyrgyz side, and close to 150,000 local Batken Region inhabitants being evacuated, in effect instantly becoming internally displaced population), Dr. Mamytov stresses the circumstances where the country was taken by surprise and was not able to mobilize the corresponding army units (for such mobilization, at least 48 hours would have passed by), and that even the information possessed by the State Committee for National Security of the Kyrgyz Republic (GKNB) was scarce and incomplete. The Kyrgyz scholar also highlights the very fact that the Fergana Valley – where most Central Asian territorial disputes occur – also happened to be a place not so far from another Tajik-majority populated Uzbek city of Samarkand, where the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit was taking place during the border skirmishes. He added ironically that while some global questions are being addressed and perhaps solved at the summit, new conflicts are being set up in the neighborhood.

Displays of mutual distrust between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can be seen everywhere – in the summer 2022, five post-Soviet Central Asian nations convened for a consultative summit at the Lake Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan, and the media following the event must have noticed from the onset of the meeting that most photo opportunities were zoomed in onto the leaders of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and the hosting Kyrgyzstan, with the presidents of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan ostentatiously missing. An observation was provided in the interview of Dr. Mamytov – directing attention to some of the obvious precursors of the September military clashes. At this July 2022 Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Leaders of Central Asian States in picturesque city of Cholpon-Ata, on the shores of the Kyrgyz Lake Issyk-Kul, it was namely Tajiki-

¹⁰ Televised interview of Dr. Toktokuchuk Mamytov in “Real View with Rita Mukalaeva”, September 19, 2022, https://youtu.be/_moAZk4KNY8. The implied message regarding the physical description of the deployed fighters from the Tajik side was that these may have been non-Tajik mercenaries – given the porous borders between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, it cannot be excluded that foreign radical fighters for hire are being used in the Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict. While the Taliban-controlled Kabul may not want to be associated with any regional non-Afghan related conflicts, the real threat, according to Dr. Mamytov, stems from the extremist groupings within Afghanistan that are not controlled by the Taliban.

stan and Turkmenistan that declined to sign the “Agreement on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation for Development of Central Asia in the 21st century” (envisaged as a meeting’s hallmark declaration, proposed by the Kazakh president Tokaev during the previous consultative summit), with Tajikistan referring to the “need to consult the Parliament” in order to sign the document. While the position of Turkmenistan not to enter any particular conflicts in the region, but also any special friendship frameworks either, as part of their “Bitarap” (neutral foreign policy) stratagem may be understandable (on top of the fact that the new Turkmen president, the son of the previous head of state, was installed into position only in March 2022), Tajikistan’s position was both the slap in the face of the summit’s host, as well as laughable excuse. As Mamytov put it bluntly, “the Tajik Parliament is the more rubber-stamp body than ours”, and the outright refusal of the Tajik President Rahmon to join the declaration should have raised the red flags in the eyes of the Kyrgyz leadership already in the summer 2022.

4. The Vector of a “Third Party” at Play?

Given the centuries of world superpower’s interference in the Central Asian affairs, it is understandable that every conflict, whether a reoccurring old one or a newly created one, draws various theories regarding a “third party” stirring up the decades old animosities into the open confrontations. While the local population’s finger pointing vaguely at the “West” can be frequently encountered without providing any specific evidence, the mere issue of such accusations merits some examination. Certainly, Dr. Mamytov in his televised interview was also asked whether he sees any other player present at the roots of the current hostilities, but he restrained himself to noting that the role of the regional Shanghai Cooperation Organization continuously grows to more global dimensions, and “perhaps someone does not like it”.

Another Kyrgyz political analyst, commenting on the issue privately, spoke in a more direct fashion, showing in the direction of the USA and United Kingdom. For one, he says, the US troops conducted military exercises in Tajikistan just a month before the September 14 clashes, hinting on a possibility that the Tajik armed forces may have been given opportunities to “rehearse” the incursion. As another indication, the expert mentions the long-term presence of one of the Tajik president’s daughters, Ozoda in the United Kingdom (herself a career diplomat having served, among others at the Tajik Embassy in Washington, as well as the Head of Presidential Administration and the country’s parliamentarian), from where she wages a suc-

cessful information war beneficial to the Tajik cause “with the corresponding local counterparts”.¹¹

The expert also goes further in depicting the (lack) of power play surrounding the current Kyrgyz president Japarov – and as such, he (and consequently also his country) is susceptible to third party manipulations aimed at general instability in all of the Central Asian region, also hinting at a possibility of another “color revolution” that may already be overdue in Kyrgyzstan. While most of the other post-Soviet Central Asian republics essentially took almost 30 years to change their leadership originally installed after the break-up of the Soviet Union¹², Japarov is a leader who came in by revolution, a phenomenon being an idiosyncrasy in Central Asia everywhere except for Kyrgyzstan. In all other “Stans”, the leader is firmly embedded in his presidential position and most of opposition is either in jail, detention centers or in exile. Japarov is, according to the political analyst, a proverbial white crow – and because he did not come to power by usurping the government, he is not recognized by the others “as one of their own”. In other words, Japarov is an exception (which probably can be applied to every Kyrgyz president who came to lead the country after Askar Akaev, and whoever will eventually replace Japarov), and as a such, the other Central Asian leaders have very little to offer to him to bring stability to the border region with Tajikistan. The expert is not afraid to voice a concern that whatever the original cause for the border hostilities may have been, the other Central Asian leaders may see the situation even as an opportunity to conspire against Japarov, and perhaps replace him with someone “more acceptable to the club”. As an unofficial adviser to the president Japarov, the expert already suggested to the president to be closer to the Russian president Putin back in February 2022, with the unfolding situation around strained Russia-Ukraine relations in the background. Instead, Japarov started to take internally, and declare publicly, a rather neutral position regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict (with more than one million Kyrgyz citizens working in Russia as temporary workers, it may have been at least a logical step to voice some support for Putin), and as a result, Putin may have chosen not to get involved personally in the Kyrgyz-Tajik border issues. According to

¹¹ By the account of L.B.S., an official of the Administration of the former president Almazbek Atambayev. As a prominent Kyrgyz political analyst he has close relations to the current presidential administration, and while most of the Atambayev former staff (including Atambayev himself) have been indicted on various charges related to that period of Presidency, L.B.S. has never been implicated in any accusations of wrongdoing.

¹² Tajikistan is essentially ruled by the same president that came into power in early 1990's, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan changed their leaders relatively recently, and Turkmenistan cosmetically exchanged the person in the top post in 2022 within the family succession of the previous president.

the expert, one phone call placed from Vladimir Putin to Emomali Rahmon would have at least stopped the military actions, and Russia could have successfully brokered some kind of provisional agreement between the Kyrgyz and the Tajiks. The consequences of a diplomatic stalemate between the two countries may have some specific ramifications – in the process of regulating the conflict the Tajiks cling onto the Soviet era border delineation of the 1920's, and the extreme consequence could be that by spring 2023, Tajikistan will overtake the territory of all Batken Region.¹³

While the Kyrgyz border situation did receive some limited international media attention (less than ongoing Azeri-Armenian conflict, and much less than the Russo-Ukrainian war), the problem, according to the expert, also lies in the fact that the US does not fully believe the Japarov's supposedly neutral stance towards Russia. Therefore it will not be the USA, nor Turkey, nor any Western alliance such as NATO that could come “to the rescue”, and if Japarov is not taken to the “Club of the Stans” by Putin, Russia also has very little to offer in terms of long-term solutions to the issue. In effect, Japarov is an individual “alienated among his own” and very little is being envisaged to change while he is in the top country position. China may be the only regional power that could hypothetically assist in regulating the permanent demarcation of Kyrgyz-Tajik border, the question is whether she wants to. The last, but not least, an important factor is in Tajik side's military preparedness for any offensive or defensive maneuvers, given their comparatively high degree of “war experience” through their own civil war. The expert concludes that just like the hybrid war in Ukraine's Donbass region, the current conflict can essentially be described as an undeclared war by Tajikistan towards Kyrgyzstan.¹⁴

Now a very public political commentator and a former Kyrgyz intelligence officer, Colonel Taalaybek Djumadylov, does not shy from pointing a finger directly at the United Kingdom (as one of the long-term players in Central Asia's Great Game of the 19-20th centuries), and very specifically at its foreign intelligence service MI-6, calling the newest Tajik military incursion into Kyrgyzstan as the “greetings from MI-6 to SCO, CSTO and first of all – Russia”.¹⁵

¹³ From the numerous private conversations with L.B.S. in the days following September 14 Tajik incursion into Batken region.

¹⁴ L.B.S. who knows the Tajik president Rahmon personally, also asserts that Putin is the only remaining authority in the Central Asian region that could instigate changes in inter-regional relationships, and the only one whose advice or suggestion would be taken seriously by Rahmon.

¹⁵ <https://kundemi.kg/index.php?newsid=9849>.

Djumadylov lays out in a way intriguing plan of action on part of the British intelligence seemingly not related to Kyrgyzstan at all, whereby the United Kingdom aims at utilizing the post-August 2021 power vacuum in Afghanistan by fragmenting the remnants of the republic into at least four parts, based on their respective ethnic composition – its western part with ethnic Hazaras to fall under the influence of Iran, Pashtus to be controlled by Pakistan, the Uzbek-populated north of the country to become Uzbekistan dominated and the north-eastern part to be embedded into Tajikistan's control. The legacy of the regionally celebrated anti-Taliban fighter leader, the “Lion of Panjshir” – an ethnic Tajik Ahmad Shah Massoud – and his United Front (now headed by Massoud's son) are one of the best instruments how to eventually diminish Taliban's control of Afghanistan and its vile influence in the neighborhood, and according to Djumadylov the MI-6 succeeded in convincing Emomali Rahmon that only he can unite the 12 million ethnic Tajiks living in Afghanistan with the 8 million in Tajikistan (which could then prove to be the only united formidable force to resist the Taliban). From the larger perspective, the new so-called Great Game 2.0, would eventually allow the British to confront Russia in the region of Central Asia. Then a legitimate question is – why is Kyrgyzstan being attacked by Tajikistan? Just as other Kyrgyz political observers, Djumadylov also underscores that the process of handing over the country's control to a family heir in Tajikistan faces certain problems, and by creating an illusion of the “external enemy”, Rahmon was advised by his British handlers that he can smooth the task of power transition.¹⁶

5. Water as a Possible Focal Point of the Conflict

Tajikistan's relations have been tense within the last 30 years not only with Kyrgyzstan, but also with the other neighbor – Uzbekistan. And it is the water which is one of the contested issues – the author recalls a car trip from Uzbek Tashkent to Tajik Khujand in August 2013 over the land border – which was at that time still off limits to civilians of the both countries, and the only option to be able to cross the border by car was to make use of a vehicle with consular number plates. It takes a little less than an hour from Tashkent to reach the Uzbek side of the border – and at the height of the summer most

¹⁶ Ibid. The ex-GKNC officer also illustrates that on the post-Soviet area, the succession into the hands of family members is nothing new, but there were “successful” examples as well as “failures”. Azerbaijan or Turkmenistan count for more fortunate instances of straightforward transition of the country's control, while Kyrgyzstan's first President Akaev or Kazakhstan's Nazarbaev did not manage to transfer their control onto their relatives.

of the land that one passes through before reaching the border crossing is parched and dry. Right after crossing the border, however, a phenomenal sight opened – roads surrounded by the lush greenery, and any visitor would soon be greeted by the emerald color Kayrakkum water reservoir on the Tajik side. It did make one wonder why in a span of less than 50 km, one side of the border struggles to provide enough water resources to secure the agricultural needs, while on the other side the abundance of clean fresh water even makes it possible to provide the local population with a summer aqua-park.

Kayrakkum Reservoir near Khujand, Tajikistan¹⁷



A predominant reliance on agriculture and livestock breeding as local livelihoods in border areas between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where the co-existence of the two distinct ethnic groups is already exacerbated by the complex border demarcation and inclusion of several ethnic exclaves, gives way to a constant competition for water resources – used either for irrigation or the animal farms. A Kyrgyz expert on pasture resource management, Gulzana Kurmanalieva, observes that it is namely the relationship of upstream-living Tajiks (having abundance of water) and downstream-living Kyrgyz (being dependent on how much water is left for them) – the seasonally shared water channels are used at times of conflict to escalate the tensions:

Further, water resources often serve as an instrument to put pressure on each other among the Tajik and Kyrgyz communities. Whenever there are other conflicts at the border territories, the communities block water canals to each other which causes new tensions and escalates the situation.¹⁸

Furthermore, the complicated Pasture Reforms in Kyrgyzstan in 1990's and the Land Reform in Tajikistan in early 2000's with their respective pro-

¹⁷ Photo of the author, August 2013.

¹⁸ Kurmanalieva G. (2019), *Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Endless Border Conflicts*, p. 8.

visions aimed at protecting their own ethnic groups have resulted in mutual limitations as to the optimal use of the grazing land to which both communities may have an access, given the geographical composition of exclaves and overall form of the current border demarcation. While the certain legal frameworks have been enacted on both sides of the border, practical mechanisms on sharing of the water resources are lacking, and there seems to be no willingness on either side to address the issue.

Water resources in the Kyrgyz – Tajik border regions are managed by the state, province and district levels. However, despite of existing institutions, many water conflicts remain due to a lack of precise mechanisms of transboundary water management.¹⁹

The Batken Region on the Kyrgyz side (where both 2021 and 2022 Tajik military incursions occurred) and the Sughd Province on the Tajik side rely on livestock and farming, with the Tajiks being dependent on water resources controlled by the neighboring Kyrgyzstan. The April 2021 clashes, deadliest in the 30 years of the post-Soviet period of independence, also caused over 30,000 Kyrgyz inhabitants to flee the region, making them effectively internally displaced. Most observers agree that in this instance, the source of Isfara River water used by the three communities around the Fergana Valley alike – Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Tajiks, was the cause of the dispute when the Kyrgyz inhabitants spotted the Tajik personnel installing surveillance equipment around the water intake facility. The local Kyrgyz villages coming under the military attacks from Tajikistan, resulting in the houses and the local school burned down and looted, drew even calls by the international community to investigate the alleged war crimes perpetrated by the Tajik armed forces.

6. Issues of Tajik Presidential Accession and Other Internal Factors at Play

Keeping the members of the leaderships of the five post-Soviet Central Asian countries “in a Club” (and from the historical superpower point of view to keep this Club revolving around Moscow leadership) always poses one question – how to keep the internal national influence within one clan, one family, and one succession line. With Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan having recently changed their respective nominal heads of the state, and with Kyrgyzstan permanently prone to a periodic change of guard, only Tajikistan finds itself today within a strong grip of a man who came to the country’s presidency in 1994. While officially the third President of the

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 8.

independent Tajikistan after the break-up of the USSR, Emomali Rahmon has been in charge of the country almost from the onset of independence in 1992, having presided over all the period of Tajik Civil War. Having succeeded to “constitutionally designate” his eldest son Rustam as an official successor to the presidency (Rustam currently holds the title of the Chairman of the National Assembly of Tajikistan as well as the Mayor of Tajikistan’s Capital Dushanbe), Rahmon Senior probably starts to feel the limitations of his age and accompanying health. The obvious obstacle to a smooth succession process, should Rustam be put in charge today, is Rustam’s tender age of 34 – although he has been groomed for the top post long enough by the virtue of being the family’s eldest son (including having been promoted to the rank of Major General of the country’s armed forces), he may not smoothly fit into the “Club” as a leader supported by all sections of Tajik society. One thorny issue that the Tajik leadership has not coped with in the past 30 years is the status of the Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region which makes up almost half of the country’s territory, and the ethnic strife between its indigenous Pamiris and the Tajiks that was at the core of Tajik Civil War of 1992-1997. While the war nominally ended in June 1997, in practice it resulted in a military stalemate, with Dushanbe unable to control the GBAO region and its socio-economic development. The autonomous region serves to this day as the bastion of opposition, and many of its prominent political figures direct its actions from exile in Western Europe. Together with the issue of Tajik exclave of Vorukh in Kyrgyzstan’s Batken Region, it represents a serious challenge to the Tajik leadership in the sense of both territorial integrity as well as national cohesion.

In the view of the political analyst Dr. Mamytov, one way to hand over the power in Tajikistan from the father to son in an unhindered fashion would be to artificially (and temporarily) unite the country’s opposing factions around an “international” issue – with this issue being the border conflict with the neighboring Kyrgyzstan. According to Dr. Mamytov, one of the ways to try to solve these internal Tajik issues is to find a common enemy that will in part deflect some attention from these pressing questions, and in part could be to blame should an internal national dissent become visible. Tajikistan clearly cannot afford to designate Afghanistan, Uzbekistan or China as its perceived enemy, and the regionally weakest Kyrgyzstan takes on this position. Both the GBAO and Vorukh exclave are local barrels filled with gunpowder, ready to explode at any moment.²⁰

²⁰ Televised interview of Dr. Toktokuchuk Mamytov in “Real View with Rita Mukalaeva”, September 19, 2022, https://youtu.be/_moAZk4KNY8.

7. New Approaches towards the Problem Resolution Needed

Dr. Mamytov emphasizes that coming to the negotiations table with own versions of the delineated maps does not help anymore, and a new methodology needs to be adopted should both parties wish to come closer to resolution of the conflict. In his view, a “hot phase” of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border dispute started in 2002 when the two sides commenced a process by which they hoped they would finally demarcate the border to mutual satisfaction. This was also the time when the Kyrgyz-Uzbek, Kyrgyz-Kazakh and Kyrgyz-Chinese border demarcation issues had more or less been completed.²¹ The Kyrgyz-Tajik undertakings regarding the border delineation were relatively problem-free until 2010 – during that time the borders in the mountain area with minimum population on both sides were being agreed upon (around 511 km). The difficulties arose when the 460+ km section of the border going through the populated valley started to be negotiated – this is where the talks entered a dead-end and the political stalemate ensued. In the period of 2013-2014 when the CSTO offered to become an intermediary in the conflict following a round of violence at the border, the Kyrgyz side was content to have this regional organization arbitrating the situation, but the Tajiks found it impossible to accept. Therefore, Dr. Mamytov concludes, before any third party is introduced as a facilitator or mediator, the two sides need to ratify within their respective Parliaments the acceptance of the international arbiter and also the modus by which they would accept the ultimate decision. The expert is also considering a notion that the Batken Region, being the constant target of Tajik military incursions, should be fortified with some kind of permanent armed outpost set up there – but the militarization of the Kyrgyz side of the border is not a solution in itself, and continuation of peaceful diplomatic approaches, without Kyrgyzstan becoming a perpetrator in international relations, needs to be secured. And to avoid more bloodshed in the future, some non-standard approaches need to be adopted, including the launching of the information offensive, making sure that “the world sees the true face and intentions of the opponent”.²²

A Kyrgyz political commentator, Bakyt Baketaev, in May 2021 after the military scuffle at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in April, drew a parallel between the never-ending Israeli-Palestinian territorial conflict and the escalating si-

²¹ Out of 1,400 km of the border shared between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, about 15% is still subject to a definitive agreement on demarcation. The future of the Kemptir-Abad water reservoir, between the Uzbek Andijan Province and the Kyrgyz Osh region, was being discussed by the two sides in late September 2022, as it remains one of few disputed territories between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

²² Ibid.

tuation at one of the Central Asian borders – noting that the violent approach towards the solving of each other's territorial claims in Palestine started after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, clearly suggesting the similar fate was waiting the post-Soviet nations as well. He also stresses the (in)effectiveness of involvement of international organizations in resolving the bilateral issues if the interests of the involved states do not overlap with those of international arbiters. That way, he considers it a grave mistake to allow the United Nations establish the enclaves of Gaza and the West Bank, calling them the “political appendicitis” – their formation did not contribute to solving any post-Second World War issues, and to the contrary created new problems that cannot be solved for decades. He also provides his political formula for solving international conflicts as follows:

$$P = (NI - Gov) \times (II + St)$$

where P – Peace, NI – National Interest, Gov – Government, II – International Institutes, St – States.²³

8. Conclusions

The freshly revived border conflict in the Kyrgyz Batken Region is nowhere near a solution, and the effects of the September 2022 military incursion from the side of Tajikistan will linger for some time to come. The Kyrgyz President Japarov decided not to attend the CIS summit in St. Petersburg on October 7 (following the decision of the Kyrgyz Head of State not to organize planned CSTO drills on the territory of Kyrgyzstan), giving way to several speculations what made him suddenly distance himself from the regional organizations that the country has been so far firmly embedded in. While the official explanation of the Presidential Administration pointed to Japarov “being too busy to attend”, most observers immediately saw a most likely cause – just a few days ago on October 4, on the eve of the Tajik President's birthday, Vladimir Putin decreed to award Emomali Rahmon with a Russian state order “For Merit to the Fatherland”. While the 70th anniversary of the nation's chieftain may have been celebrated by the Tajik society and such an award may have been in place to recognize Rahmon's “loyalty” towards the ideas of the Commonwealth, the wording for the reason of the award citing the Tajik President's “personal contribution towards the regional stability and security” triggered an outright discontent throughout the Kyrgyz political le-

²³ https://www.vb.kg/doc/401482_kluch_k_resheniu_kyrgyzsko_tadjikskogo_prigranichnogo_konflikta_v_jerysalime.html.

adership.²⁴ Japarov's absence at the CIS summit in Russia (where even the Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders sat behind the table) also further added insult to injury as the summit was set on the day of Putin's own birthday, and in this way most certainly the Kyrgyz President managed to display a symbolic gesture of disaffection with both the regional "leader", as well as his current neighborhood nemesis. The Kyrgyz political analyst Bakyt Baketaev summarized the circumstances of Japarov's absence at CIS Summit as:

There is a period of cooling down of the Kyrgyz-Russian relations. But I would not recommend to Bishkek to force the decreasing of this "temperature". The history shows that no post-Soviet republic found it useful to engage in a similar process. In diplomacy, emotions need to be set aside.²⁵

The region of Central Asia has been at the crossroads of several civilizations, empires and hegemonies for centuries, and both its geographical and cultural importance increases even more during the new global conquests for influence and control. It would be naïve to assume that any bilateral relations derive its root causes and principles only from those two respective nation-states – the history indicates over and over again that the multiple factors playing their role often include even the most geographically distant contenders. The Kyrgyz-Tajik border issue, being only a segment of a wider spectrum of Kyrgyz-Tajik national affairs, is in itself a solidification of problems that need both regional and international attention to solve. As a prime example and indication of what shape and form can seemingly a local thorny issue take when left untreated, a border skirmish leaving 60 young people dead today may become a fatality of several thousand tomorrow.

A former Kyrgyz Government official watches the re-emerged border conflict through the prism of potential destabilization of the Kyrgyz internal political order, referring to a potential need to reach out to other superpowers should the current Kyrgyz-Russian relationship not suffice for satisfactorily ensuring the Kyrgyz territorial integrity. Clearly, the only other superpower in question would be the United States, with the expert noting a possible conclusion of new Kyrgyz-US friendship treaty with a provision for re-instating the US military base in the country. The current Kyrgyz Ambassador to the

²⁴ A climax of the situation emerged on October 14 in Astana, where the Russian and Central Asian leaders (this time with the Kyrgyz President Japarov participating) met at the "Central Asia-Russia Summit" – at the round table the Tajik President Rahmon decided to give a very public and loud lecture addressed at the Russian President Putin, demanding "respect" for his nation and reminding the visibly humiliated Russian leader of the root causes of the fall of the USSR – the lack of attention to "small" republics, nations and their people – making even sure to add "the same as today there was no regard for cultures and traditions, with a willingness to assist in development", eerily forecasting the events that may be about to arrive.

²⁵ <https://kundemi.kg/index.php?newsid=9974>.

United Kingdom Edil Baisalov or the former Kyrgyz president Roza Otunbayeva are mentioned as the most prominent pro-Western individuals of the Kyrgyz national politics, who also studied and worked in the West. However, given the equal number of pro-Russian Members of the Parliament and strong pro-Russian links by the current administration, the expert cautions for a remote possibility of creating root causes for the civil war within Kyrgyzstan, should the internal political interests clash on the background of Kyrgyz-Tajik bilateral relations.²⁶

It may be tempting to succumb to accusations of the one culprit most visible for causing the suffering of the local population, and the work of scholars and diplomats needs to focus on exposing the myriad of hidden factors that lie underneath the surface of obvious evidence. At times when the food and water security becomes paramount in particular to those states that are both capable as well as willing to sustain their own population with sufficient provisions, natural resources needed to support the national economies will be fiercely guarded and defended. At the same time it should not be forgotten that at times of global crisis it is the bold and shameless that usually come out of a conflict victorious, regardless of the apparent violations of international practice, and the weak and silent are the ones giving in. Instead of indicating which scenario may be the most probable in outlining the causes of the current border issues in Central Asia, the author will invite the readers to make their own judgment.

Acknowledgements

While Kyrgyzstan with its parliamentary mechanism and sometimes too frequently changing leadership comes closest to the Western notion of democracy, it is still a country where the echo of Soviet-era general oppression, cults of personalities, and the invisible hand of the national security apparatus lingers well into the present. Much of the ongoing border issue would have been impossible to fully comprehend from the Kyrgyz viewpoint without an individual input on part of several former national security officers and experts with their first-hand experience in several presidential administrations within the past 30 years. Even they would not have shared their most intimate inside knowledge on the issue without first establishing a certain level of comradeship – which takes both time and effort by establishing mutual credentials first. I am greatly indebted for their extended friendship and their

²⁶ By the account of L.B.S., an official of the Administration of the former president Almazbek Atambayev, following his own visit to the Batken Region with destructed villages at the beginning of October 2022.

willingness to speak on the subject-matter openly, albeit in the references they sometimes remain anonymous to protect their well-being at home. It is an earnest wish to find similarly brave individuals willing to share their views and analysis also on the Tajik side – the process of gaining similar friends will take time, but I believe in the sincere approach from both sides of the conflict towards the gradual peaceful resolution.

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Questo volume è stato stampato
nel mese di dicembre 2022
su materiali e con tecnologie ecocompatibili
presso la LITOGRAFIA SOLARI
Peschiera Borromeo (MI)

La Rivista semestrale *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società* intende la *Sicurezza* come una condizione che risulta dallo stabilizzarsi e dal mantenersi di misure proattive capaci di promuovere il benessere e la qualità della vita dei cittadini e la vitalità democratica delle istituzioni; affronta il fenomeno del *Terrorismo* come un processo complesso, di lungo periodo, che affonda le sue radici nelle dimensioni culturale, religiosa, politica ed economica che caratterizzano i sistemi sociali; propone alla *Società* – quella degli studiosi e degli operatori e quella ampia di cittadini e istituzioni – strumenti di comprensione, analisi e scenari di tali fenomeni e indirizzi di gestione delle crisi.

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Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società è un semestrale che pubblica 2 numeri all'anno. Oltre ai due numeri programmati possono essere previsti e pubblicati numeri speciali.

EDUCatt - Ente per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario dell'Università Cattolica
Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.72342235 - fax 02.80.53.215
e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (produzione) - librario.dsu@educatt.it (distribuzione)
redazione: redazione@itstime.it
web: www.sicurezzaerrorismosocieta.it
ISBN: 978-88-9335-041-9

Euro 20,00

