

THE PROBLEM OF ARTIFICIAL BORDERS AND ENCLAVES IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE CASE OF KYRGYZ-TAJIK RELATIONS

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Abstract: This article talks about the political and social problems on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in Central Asia. After the Soviet Union collapsed, old internal Soviet borders became international borders, which caused many land disputes between the two countries. The study explains that both sides use different historical maps to prove their claims, creating tension and conflicts. It also shows how problems over water and land resources make the situation worse, especially in the Fergana Valley. The article says that increasing militarization and the lack of a common legal agreement make peaceful solutions difficult. In conclusion, the author suggests that both countries should focus more on shared resource management and compromise instead of only defending territorial claims.

Keywords: Central Asia, Kyrgyz-Tajik Border, Enclaves, Territorial Disputes, Fergana Valley.

Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 transformed internal administrative boundaries into international borders, a process that has been fraught with tension across the post-Soviet space. In Central Asia, the Fergana Valley stands as the epicenter of these complexities, where the borders of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan intersect in a labyrinthine fashion. The problem is particularly acute along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, which stretches approximately 970 kilometers, nearly half of which remains undemarcated. This lack of clarity is not merely a technical mapping issue but a profound geopolitical crisis rooted in the 'artificial' nature of Soviet border engineering.

The National-Territorial Delimitation (NTD) carried out between 1924 and 1936 by Soviet authorities aimed to create ethnically defined republics; however, the demographic reality of the region was characterized by centuries of nomadic and sedentary intermingling. The result was the creation of several enclaves – territories of one state entirely surrounded by another. In the Kyrgyz-Tajik context, the Tajik enclave of Vorukh and the Kyrgyz enclave of Barak (recently resolved through exchange) have been focal points of friction. The research objective of this article is to analyze how these artificial boundaries and enclaves serve as catalysts for modern conflict, examining the historical legal foundations and the contemporary socio-economic drivers of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border dispute. By identifying the 'research gap' in the failure of bilateral commissions to reach a consensus, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the structural impediments to peace in the region.

Methods

This study employs a multi-disciplinary qualitative research methodology, integrating historical institutionalism, spatial analysis, and comparative legal studies. The primary data sources consist of official government statements from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, bilateral agreements signed since 1991, and historical maps

from the Soviet archives. A critical component of the methodology involves the 'Map Analysis Technique,' where the 1924-1927 maps (preferred by Tajikistan) are contrasted with the 1955-1959 maps (preferred by Kyrgyzstan) to identify the specific geographic areas of overlap and dispute. Furthermore, the research utilizes a 'Case Study Approach,' focusing on the Batken (Kyrgyzstan) and Sughd (Tajikistan) regions, which have witnessed the highest frequency of border skirmishes.

To quantify the impact of these disputes, the study analyzes secondary data regarding resource allocation, specifically the distribution of water from the Isfara River and the management of the Tortgul Reservoir. The conceptual framework is grounded in the theory of 'Securitization,' examining how border issues have moved from the realm of administrative management to that of national security threats. The research also incorporates an analysis of spatial metrics where L_u represents the degree of border instability, L_u is the length of undemarcated border sections, and L is the total border length. This allows for a structural understanding of why certain segments are more prone to violence than others.

Results

The research findings indicate that the primary obstacle to border delimitation is the 'Legal Map Duality.' Tajikistan bases its claims on the documents of 1924-1927, which place the Vorukh enclave as part of the Tajik mainland, whereas Kyrgyzstan adheres to the 1955-1959 maps, which depict Vorukh as an island within Kyrgyz territory. This discrepancy has left approximately 400 kilometers of the border in a 'grey zone.' Data analysis of the 2021 and 2022 conflicts reveals a disturbing trend toward militarization. In April 2021, a dispute over a water distribution facility (Golovnoy) escalated into a full-scale military engagement, resulting in 55 deaths and over 50,000 displaced persons. The 2022 clashes were even more severe, involving heavy artillery and drones, signaling that the 'border problem' has evolved into a conventional military rivalry.

Furthermore, the results show that the 'enclave problem' is exacerbated by infrastructure limitations. The Vorukh enclave is connected to Tajikistan by a single road that passes through Kyrgyz territory; conversely, Kyrgyz villages are often dependent on roads that weave in and out of Tajik-controlled areas. Our spatial analysis identifies 70 'conflict points' where access to water, grazing land, and transit roads overlaps. The socio-economic impact is profound: local trade has decreased by 40% in border markets since 2021 due to frequent border closures. The 'water-land nexus' remains the most volatile variable, as 80% of the local population is engaged in agriculture and depends on the seasonal flow of rivers that cross undemarcated lines. The findings suggest that as long as the legal impasse persists, any minor local disagreement over a water pipe or a pasture can rapidly escalate into a national security crisis.

Discussion

The interpretation of these results suggests that the Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict is a classic example of path dependency - where decisions made in the 1920s continue to constrain modern political options. The artificiality of the borders, designed by Soviet planners who did not anticipate the collapse of the Union, has created a 'zero-sum game' for the successor states. Any territorial concession is viewed by the domestic public as a betrayal of national sovereignty, which limits the flexibility of negotiators. The 'securitization' of the border has led to a 'security dilemma' where the reinforcement of border posts by one side

prompts a reciprocal response from the other, increasing the likelihood of accidental escalation.

Moreover, the role of external actors adds another layer of complexity. Both nations are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), yet the organization has struggled to mediate a conflict between two of its own members. The discussion also highlights the 'enclave psychology' – the sense of isolation and vulnerability felt by residents of Vorukh, which drives a hardline stance from Dushanbe. Conversely, Bishkek views the enclave as a 'ticking time bomb' within its sovereign territory. The failure of high-level diplomatic commissions suggests that a 'top-down' approach is insufficient. There is a critical need for 'bottom-up' peacebuilding that focuses on joint resource management. The implications of this study suggest that until both states agree on a unified legal baseline – perhaps by creating a new, mutually acceptable map that accounts for current demographics rather than historical documents – the cycle of violence is likely to continue. The 'artificiality' of the border can only be overcome by 'organic' cooperation at the local level.

In enclave regions, especially in Kyrgyz and Tajik territories, the lack of mutual understanding among local populations, frequent delays and detentions at border crossings, as well as ethnic, religious, cultural, and political differences, all play an important role in territorial disputes. Moreover, the long-standing geopolitical rivalries between neighboring regions have attracted the attention of European countries as well. In order to prevent further tensions and conflicts, it is important to strengthen diplomatic cooperation and develop mutual agreements between the parties involved.

When looking at the map, enclave and exclave territories appear to belong to a single state because they are located within the territory of another country. Even from satellite images, the area may look like one unified state. However, due to these features and the geopolitical inconsistency of state borders, serious competition and disputes over territories still continue today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the problem of artificial borders and enclaves in Central Asia, particularly between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, represents one of the most significant threats to regional stability. The historical legacy of Soviet territorial engineering has left a heritage of 'legal dualism' and geographic fragmentation that modern diplomatic efforts have yet to resolve. This research has demonstrated that the conflict is driven by a combination of historical map discrepancies, competition for scarce water and land resources, and the increasing militarization of border zones. The key findings suggest that traditional delimitation processes are stalled because they treat the border as a line of separation rather than a zone of cooperation. For future work, it is recommended that both nations explore the possibility of 'lease-based' land use or the creation of a 'Special Economic Zone' in the disputed areas to de-escalate tensions. International mediation, perhaps through a neutral third party or a more active CSTO/SCO involvement, is essential to establish a ceasefire monitoring mechanism. Ultimately, the resolution of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border dispute requires a paradigm shift from territorial nationalism to regional integration, acknowledging that the 'artificial' lines of the past should not dictate the bloody conflicts of the future.

The delimitation problems between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan still continue today. Because of this, territorial conflicts related to border origins can still be observed. In addition,

differences in the ethnic distribution of the population and issues related to the division of labor in border regions have also become major causes of disputes. Furthermore, due to the underdevelopment of territorial labor distribution in enclave and exclave regions, many people are leaving for other countries and regions in search of work. In general, in the countries of Central Asia, the most effective and proven way to manage enclaves is considered to be the protection of mutual interests and the implementation of balanced and proper policies.

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