

CENTRAL ASIA: THE BATTLE OVER WATER

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Three recent gatherings have moved the issue of managing and sharing water resources to the very foreground of attention at the international level – the 5th World Water Forum (Istanbul, 16 - 22 March 2009) – and at the level of Central Asia – the seminar organised by the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) and by the UN Economic Commission for Europe (Almaty, 20 April 2009) and the meeting of the International Fund to Save the Aral Sea (Almaty, 28 April 2009).

Over and above the agreed upon topics of the speeches – a reminder of the United Nations Millennium Objectives, implementation of the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), maintenance of water flows, prevention of catastrophes linked to water, recognition of the human right to water and a basic clean-up as well as promotion of cooperation on sustainable use and protection of cross-border water resources¹ - these various meetings were at pains to conceal major international and regional disagreements.

As regards Central Asia, what we have at the end of the two summits in Almaty is more an image of potentially dangerous disputes than one of the so much desired regional unity. Already undermined by conflict-ridden personal relations which have been further complicated by the *Grand Game* over immense energy resources, the political climate of Central Asia seems more uncertain and unstable than ever before at the conclusion of these two gatherings. For the Israeli hydrologist Uri Shamir, *'so long as a real desire for peace exists, water cannot be an obstacle or a threat; on the other hand, it can constitute an excellent pretext for anyone seeking a good reason to pull things apart.'*² Applied in the Central Asian context, this quotation must be taken as a warning and it should prompt the main players to act with restraint.

GENESIS OF THE PROBLEMS

a) Historical causes

The fall of the Soviet empire smashed to pieces the regional plan for management, sharing and exchange of water and energy in Central Asia. From one day to the next, this region suddenly found itself split between, on the one hand, the upstream countries - Kirghizstan

¹ <http://www.iisd.ca/ymb/water/worldwater5/html/ymbvol82num22f.html>

² <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5079>

and Tajikistan - in a position to control water resources³ - and the downstream countries - Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – in a position of dependence.

Planning during the Soviet age arranged a strict sharing of water resources and energy resources. In the downstream countries, this meant responsibility for water storage in vast artificial lakes with a view to its distribution in springtime and summer for the benefit of agricultural land in the downstream countries. In return, these downstream countries, rich in gas and in oil, had to provide the upstream countries with energy resources, which they cruelly lacked.

The sudden disappearance of a directed economy and of the central control of the Soviet age left the new Independent States to themselves and stripped of levers. Ever since the beginning of the new millennium, many disputes have broken out between the upstream and the downstream countries. The upstream countries regularly criticise the excessively high prices of raw energy supplies and complain that the downstream countries balk at paying their fair share of maintenance costs of the restraining dams. For their part, the downstream countries believe that they are subjected unduly to rationing. In retaliation for unpaid gas and electricity bills, they stop delivering them, thereby plunging the populations of the upstream countries into dark and cold. In order to make their hydroelectric plants operate, the upstream countries thus resort to release of water. The consequence is a useless inflow in mid-winter of water into the agricultural lands of the Uzbek valleys while water becomes scarce for the spring and summer crops. Thus begun, the vicious circle of resentment is nowhere near coming to an end.

b) Geographic and climatic causes

Central Asia is a fundamentally arid region whose main fertile areas have been created from deserts rendered functional after titanic programmes of irrigation. Most of the water comes from the high elevations of Kirghizstan and Tajikistan, and to a lesser extent the highlands of Afghanistan. The water flows towards Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan via the two main streams of water in the region, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya.

The construction during the period of the USSR of many dams and irrigation canals certainly made it possible to meet the needs of a strong growth in the populations and major development of agricultural production, but it also gave rise to serious over-use. Ever since independence, the infrastructure - dams, hydroelectric stations and irrigation canals – has suffered terribly from a lack of maintenance. Waste and poor management of resources caused one of the greatest ecological catastrophes of the last century, the near disappearance of the Aral Sea, which had once been one of the largest inland seas in the world. As a consequence, the provinces around the Aral Sea, in particular, the region of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan, formerly known as the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Karakalpakia, are now devastated and nearly ruined.

The year 2009 is expected to be still more problematic than preceding years. The climatic cycles (very likely linked to the phenomena of El Niño - La Niña) are not only intensified but are also superimposed. The last major drought in the region took place in 2000 - 2001. It severely affected not only the Central Asian republics but also Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Mongolia, with disastrous consequences for the entire agricultural production of the region. The International Research Institute on Climatic Forecasts believes this drought of 2001 was responsible for the loss of more than half of the grain crops in Tajikistan. One team of experts from the United Nations estimated at the time that around 500,000 to 600,000 Uzbeks were directly affected by this drought.

³ Tajikistan alone controls more than 50%.

Since 2008, the water reservoirs have recorded their lowest point in history. According to the press agency *Ferghana.ru*, in 2008 the reservoir in Toktogul, the main reservoir of Kirghizstan, has seen a reduction of its reserves by 30% and according to hydrologists the rivers Syr Darya and Naryn have a flow which is clearly below their usual flow.⁴ The lowland countries suffer from this drought even more severely. Citing *Ferghana.ru* again, the water reservoirs located on the territory of Uzbekistan - Sharvak and Tujabuguz – report a level standing at about 60% of the level of previous years; as regards the other main waterways, they see a reduction in their flow on the order of 50%.⁵ These disturbing numbers unfortunately confirm the gloomy predictions which the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published during a summit in Almaty in July 2008.⁶ The latest pessimistic forecast to date was the announcement at the end of January by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan, Hamrokhon Zarifi, of a serious and definite shortage of water for Central Asia in the course of the coming summer.⁷

THE MEETINGS IN ALMATY

The UNRCCA seminar set for itself the task of examining the ways and means of reaching coordinated management of water at the regional level. On the agenda of the discussions were the currently valid regional Conventions on Water and the Environment and the United Nations Convention on Protection and Trans-border Use of International Waterways and Lakes.

Displaying guarded optimism, Miroslav Jenca, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General and Director of UNRCCA⁸, said that this conference was essential for Central Asian experts looking for a sustainable solution to regional water problems. According to him, the conference was expected to enable the Central Asian states to conclude '*lasting agreements profitable for all in the domain of water and energy.*'⁹ However, apart from broad declarations of principles, the results of this meeting were not up to the level of the ambitions posted.

The same was true of the meeting of the International Fund to Save the Aral Sea on 28 April. It ended without any tangible progress recorded. Discussions about interstate management of the course of the Amu Darya and of the Syr Darya dominated the event.

The five leaders of Central Asia are in agreement about the causes of the near disappearance of the Aral Sea – overuse and waste of resources coming from the two main rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya. And they are aware of the disastrous consequences on the living conditions and health of some 40 million inhabitants of the coastal basin of this sea. But their political and personal differences and Moscow's double game led these talks into an impasse.

Attempts by Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the host of the meeting, to calm down the discussions, and the low profile assumed by Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov did not prevent the Uzbek President Islam Karimov from leading the

⁴ <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=2375>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2008/0812_central_asia_linn.aspx

⁷ http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik_Ministry_Predicts_Regional_Water_Shortage_By_Summer_/1373056.html

⁸ Created in 2007 and based in the Turkmen capital of Ashgabat, the UNRCCA has the task of assisting the Central Asian countries to deal with trans-border problems - terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime and pollution - before they become financially too costly or escape all control.

⁹ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=30522&Cr=central+asia&Cr1>

charge against Kirghizstan and Tajikistan. Starting out as the lone horseman against the projects of the two upstream countries and criticising their more restrictive policies of water management, he was finally joined by his counterparts from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. More than ever before, he presents himself as a regional leader of the opposition to the hydroelectric projects of Kirghizstan and of Tajikistan.

THE REASONS FOR UZBEK ANGER

Following the example of their rich neighbours, veritable kings of oil and gas which draw substantial dividends from their energy resources, Tajikistan and Kirghizstan hope to become kings of blue gold. The two countries have initiated an ambitious plan to produce energy which foresees the construction of new hydroelectric stations. This would enable them to cover their own energy needs and even to become exporters of electricity to Pakistan, Iran and India.

The three downstream states, where most of agricultural production depends on cotton, wheat and rice, are opposed to such a plan, which, in their opinion, would translate into a reduction of their water resources. Up to the present, the various attempts at compromise have all ended in failure. The four signed international treaties have for the moment remained 'dead letters.'

The two projects on which the fears of Uzbekistan focus are those of Rogun in Tajikistan and of section no. 1 of a hydroelectric plant in Kambar-Ata, situated upstream from the reservoir of Toktogul in Kirghizstan. Ultimately these two projects jointly threaten the supply of water to the entire eastern part of Uzbekistan and especially the Ferghana Valley.

While no major conflict has yet broken out, the possibility of an escalation towards armed conflict cannot be put aside. Two recent examples, which are minor to be sure, illustrate very clearly the tension surrounding this problem of water. In 2000, Uzbekistan staged a military exercise with the unspoken scenario of taking control of the Toktogul reservoir situated on the territory of Kirghizstan which makes possible the irrigation of its agricultural operations in the Ferghana Valley. This exercise amounted to a response to repeated flooding by releases of Kirghiz water with a view to winter production of electricity.¹⁰ In March 2008, 150 Tajik villagers from Isfara crossed the Kirghiz border with their arms ready to destroy a dam which threatened their farms and they were beaten into retreat after the muscular intervention of Tajik border guards.¹¹

The dissensions reached a peak at the end of 2008 when the heads of state of Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan came to agreement, in the absence of Uzbekistan, on the problems of water, gas and oil. In response, Uzbekistan announced its withdrawal from the Organisation of Eurasian Economic Cooperation, the closing of its border with Tajikistan and an increase in the price of gas to its Tajik and Kirghiz customers.¹²

MOSCOW'S DOUBLE GAME

It was two recent statements by the Russian authorities which unleashed and sustained the agitation in the corridors of the meeting in Almaty. The first was made by President Medvedev during his visit in January to Tashkent. Coming out resolutely on the side of the Uzbek authorities, and to the great displeasure of the Tajik authorities, he called for *'the hydroelectric projects in Central Asia to take into account the considerations of*

¹⁰ <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5079>

¹¹ http://www.rferl.org/content/Commentary_Water_Crisis_Central_Asia/1185586.html

¹² <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=2497>

neighbouring countries.'¹³ The second was made during a visit to Moscow of the Kirghiz President Kurmanbek Bakiy in February. The Russian authorities committed themselves to grant a loan of 1.3 billion Euros for the construction of the Kambar-Ata hydroelectric plant.

This '*shilly-shallying*' of the Russian authorities, between support for the Uzbek position and financing the Kirghiz project – with a dotted line suggesting a possible unfreezing of the Tajik project in Rogun¹⁴ –, did not fail to elicit some questions regarding the objectives being pursued by Moscow. The start of an answer to this can be found in an interview given by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov during a recent trip to Turkmenistan: '*... it is necessary to succeed in reaching a compromise advantageous to all and in the special domain of water resources the Central Asian states can count on the unfailing support of Russia...*'¹⁵ The Russian authorities seem not to want to overlook any possibility of assisting their key position and their leading role in Central Asia. By thus inviting themselves into the discussion over water, while giving pledges to their most loyal allies of the moment,¹⁶ they provide themselves with a means of pressure on the three downstream countries all of which hold immense energy resources which are especially coveted, and Gazprom is the principal, nearly the sole beneficiary.

However, it would seem that Russian involvement has contributed to easing the atmosphere somewhat, especially the tensions between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. During the last few weeks, after an intense escalation rising to 19 February 2009, the very complicated Uzbek-Tajik relations have slowly begun to improve. Uzbekistan has resumed its deliveries of electricity and negotiations are now going to resume for delimitation and demarcation of the 1,200 km of common borders and re-establishment of air links which were cut 17 years ago.

CONCLUSION

While all regional experts agree on the beneficial aspect for the region of building new dams and hydroelectric plans, they nonetheless worry about the exacerbation of problems this can lead to. Until now the region has avoided a conflict. But it is not safe from anything.

Some initiatives presently being studied appear to be potentially destabilising and dangerous. In the course of the 5th World Water Forum, many discussions dealt with the possible marketing of water as it becomes a commercial product. This commercialisation would constitute a precedent in Central Asia and would risk profoundly colliding with the beliefs of the Muslim populations of the region. Indeed the Muslim religion has a well established position on the subject. Water is the property of Allah, who, in his great indulgence, gives it as a gift to the faithful. It thus seems difficult to combine the values of economic liberalism, which governs commercial exchanges between the Central Asian countries, with the traditional and religious practices.

In the special domain of water, what it seems we should fear the most is not '*the drop too much which would cause the glass to overflow*' but the '*drop of water less which would let the gunpowder ignite.*'

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¹³http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik_Leader_Arrives_In_Moscow_With_More_Leverage_Less_Faith/1498425.html

¹⁴ A project for which Tajikistan has been waiting for the past 5 years ; now Russia is honouring its promise of financing in the amount of 1.5 billion Euros. Cf.

<http://www.esisc.org/documents/pdf/fr/tadjikistan-le-maillon-faible-440.pdf>

¹⁵ Interview with Mir TV in April outside a summit of the CIS Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁶ Kirghizstan has evicted American troops from its base in Manas. As for Tajikistan, which harbours the largest Russian base outside the territory of the RF, it is considering strengthening its military cooperation with Moscow.