

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/will-central-asia-water-wars-derail-chinas-silk-road/>

Will Central Asia Water Wars Derail China's Silk Road?

China needs to be wary of a looming water crisis in Central Asia.

By Nishtha Chugh
March 24, 2017

It wasn't until the second century BC that ancient China arguably discovered the true potential of Central Asia's geostrategic golden ticket. As the then-reigning Han Dynasty set out to formally establish a network of trade routes crisscrossing the region, later christened as the Silk Road, it realized that the Eurasian gateway was the perfect conduit to carry its political, economic, and cultural influence to the eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire, the present day Middle East and South Asia. Combined with marine routes of the time, the Silk Road not only became an important passage for subsequent Chinese rulers to trade in spices, silk, and slaves but also helped them exchange news ideas in science, arts, religion, literature, and crafts.

Almost 700 years after the decline of the ancient trade network, China, in its modern avatar as the world's second largest economy, is aspiring to replicate that old glory and influence through a revival of its historical Silk Road. And once again it has turned to its old neighbors and allies in Central Asia to capitalize on the region's geostrategic advantage. The new reincarnation, known as the Silk Road Economic Belt or SREB, is China's prodigiously bold economic ambition to connect with potentially 40 countries across Europe, Asia, and Africa. The vast economic corridors and infrastructural network, when fully functional, will potentially give China

unprecedented access to 60 percent of the world's population and a third of global wealth. It's an audacious plan for a country that now clamors for unquestionable global clout.

However, a brewing crisis is threatening to derail Beijing's mega project, now a major foreign policy priority, in the very region that's most critical to its success. Rising hostilities over water resources, a recurring source of tensions and armed conflicts between Central Asia's five countries, are at the brink of escalating into a potential full-blown conflict. The region is currently reeling under the worst yet spell of water shortages and chronic power cuts.

At the root of the crisis is the collapse of a complex Soviet-era system that for decades divided resources between Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. And the dispute is not just limited to the five countries. The crisis also significantly affects Afghanistan and China, the two other stakeholders in Central Asia's precarious power and water sharing deals.

According to a global stress map produced by the Water Resources Institute last year, Central Asia has one of the world's highest water-stress levels. The region, with a population of 66 million, gets 90 percent of its water supply from two rivers, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya. Both river basins fall under the control of upstream countries Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The downstream countries –Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan — on the other hand, have abundant oil and gas resources. This disproportional distribution of natural wealth worked in tandem for the five countries when they were still part of the Soviet Union. Enforcing a system of quotas and rationing schedules, Moscow made sure the distribution of resources between the neighbors remained equitable and productive. The cooperation resulted in sufficient water supply for agricultural irrigation in downstream countries and adequate power for upstream countries.

But with the fall of the Soviet Union this resource-sharing arrangement gradually spiraled into chaos in the 1990s. Competing claims over resources and national interests took priority after the erstwhile Soviet territories gained independence. In the last two decades, a number of factors have combined to worsen the situation for the whole region. Poor conservation and irrigation practices, corruption, high birth rates, political differences, deeply flawed economic policies, and climate change have all contributed to deepen the water scarcity in Central Asia. Ironically, the five nations rank among the top 11 most wasteful water consumers globally. Turkmenistan has the world's highest per capita water consumption at 5.5 thousand cubic meters annually — four times the United States' water consumption and 13 times greater than that of China. Despite establishing domestic and regional bodies to collaborate on resource-sharing matters, a severe lack of cooperation and rationalization among the five countries has exacerbated the issue.

The current crisis and hostilities in Central Asia have essentially boiled down to the question of energy security vs. food security for the individual nations. In 2009, Uzbekistan, one of the three energy-rich downstream countries, started selling electricity to Afghanistan for higher profits. The move left Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan with chronic power cuts, freezing winters, and slow economic output. In return the two upstream countries decided to draw more water to produce electricity for winter, creating a water scarcity for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan's agricultural irrigation. Work on Tajikistan's controversial Rogun Dam has resumed again after stalling several times since it began 40 years ago amid threats from Uzbekistan.

Kazakhstan, on the other hand, is concerned about China's relentless efforts to meet the water needs of its thirsty Xinjiang province by diverting water from the Irtysh and Ily rivers. The Irtysh, which also flows through Russia, is a major source of drinking water for Astana, the Kazakh capital. The Ily, on the other hand, flows through Xinjiang before feeding into Kazakhstan's Lake Balkhash. China has been diverting water from the Ily River since the 1980s through a network of canals to support Xinjiang's highly water-intensive cotton crops and other industries. Ultimately, this could spell disaster for Lake Balkhash.

Being an upstream country for most of Asia's rivers, China is able to exercise great control, including through the construction of dams, over the flow of transboundary water. For a country that built its prodigious economic empire on a bedrock of abundant natural resources, China's unrelenting approach to shared natural assets with its neighbors comes barely as a surprise. It is also one of the only three countries that voted against the UN Watercourses Convention (the other two are Burundi and Turkey).

But the Central Asia region has assumed a new relevance for China since President Xi Jinping announced the SREB project in 2013. The region immediately to China's west is a vital leg of Beijing's estimated \$250 billion megaproject spanning across Africa, Asia, and Europe. And making Central Asia more connected through intensive infrastructural investments is one of the key points of Xi's grand vision. Even before the project was unveiled China was already the preeminent economic power in the region. Large investments and infrastructural projects such as high-speed railway links, roads, bridges, tunnels, oil and gas pipelines, and a dry port built with Chinese money are dotted across the Central Asian countries. In return, Beijing receives a large slice of the Central Asian energy market. In Kazakhstan, a quarter of the total oil production is in Chinese hands. More than half of Turkmenistan's gas exports are sent to China. The deluge of Chinese men and money have significantly reshaped the Central Asian economies.

With billions of dollars riding on current and future projects, any breakdown in relations between the erstwhile Soviet states is, therefore, a risk China can ill afford. Perhaps the biggest single flashpoint is Tajikistan's Rogun Dam. Construction work on Rogun Dam resumed two months after the death of Uzbek President Islam Karimov in September 2016. Karimov had openly warned of a war if construction of the dam was continued. When completed, the Rogun project would be the world's tallest dam and would secure Tajikistan's energy future. But this would come at a significant cost to Uzbekistan, which is likely to further strain the relations between the neighbors and potentially destabilize the region.

Given the risks Central Asia's water crisis poses to its grand ambition, China may be forced, sooner rather than later, to embrace water diplomacy to diffuse the tensions. As much as building ports and bridges, Beijing also seriously needs to think about investing in Central Asia's crumbling and wasteful irrigational infrastructure. Agriculture in the region consumes up to 75 percent of fresh water resources, much of which is lost to substandard irrigational systems. Better cultivation practices, higher quality seeds, and exchange of agricultural technology with China could create a new framework of cooperation between the Central Asian countries.

Notwithstanding its economic aspirations, Beijing must recognize that Central Asia will be ripe for conflicts and destabilization as its population grows and the strain on natural resources

increases. A timely long-term investment strategy to diffuse the region's water crisis will guarantee China higher dividends on its investment in SREB.