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Nazarbayev, Karimov seek water solution

By Margarita Assenova

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It was not the first time Central Asia's water disputes have taken a prominent place on the summit agenda of the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Nursultan Nazarbayev and Islam Karimov, respectively. But the meeting in Tashkent on June 14-15 attached particular importance to water management, as it became part of the new Strategic Partnership Agreement between the two countries.

The long-standing problem with water is evidently considered by both leaders to be one of the biggest security risks to the region, along with terrorism, drug trafficking, separatism and organized crime. The two presidents called for a United Nations review of two major hydropower projects in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan at a time when the World Bank is preparing to finalize its feasibility study for one of them, the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan.

Plans by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to build two dams upstream on Central Asia's main rivers - the Amu Darya to the south and Syr Darya to the north - are aimed at resolving their energy problems. However, these dams would threaten the water supplies for irrigation downstream in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Both rivers flow into what remains of the Aral Sea, which was devastated by the expansion of irrigation canals during the Soviet period.

Tajikistan wants to build the Rogun Dam on a tributary of the Amu Darya; the 3.6-gigawatt hydropower facility would be the world's tallest dam at 335 meters. The hydropower plant would supply electricity to Tajikistan and its neighbors, including the northern regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The prospect is attractive to the West, because it promises to boost economic

development in Afghanistan. However, President Emomalii Rahmon is unable to secure the US\$3 billion needed for the dam's construction, and a dispute over the project with Uzbekistan has intensified.

Kyrgyzstan, for its part, would like to proceed with building the 1.9-gigawatt Kambarata-1 dam on the Naryn River, a tributary to the Syr Darya. Both of these upstream countries' planned hydropower facilities, conceived during the Soviet time, are slated to be built with Russian help.

The Soviet system of exchanging water from the upstream republics for oil and gas from the hydrocarbon-rich lower lands no longer exists, and the Amu Darya and Syr Darya now cross several interstate borders. Consequently, conflicts between the five Central Asian countries are persistent.

Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov warned during his 2012 visit to Kazakhstan that water problems "could deepen to the extent of causing not just serious confrontation, but even wars". Tashkent has vehemently opposed the building of Rogun and Kambarata; to discourage their construction, it has interrupted energy supplies to Dushanbe and Bishkek, disrupted transportation routes, and even placed mines on its border with Tajikistan.

According to the United Nations Development Program's 2013 Human Development Report, Uzbekistan leads among Central Asian countries in fresh water consumption as a percentage of its renewable water resources, using more than can be replenished: it consumed 118.3% of its available renewable water supplies in 2012. Turkmenistan's level is also slightly above 100%.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, hosting the most water resources in the region, had fresh water consumption rates as compared to their renewable water resources of 74.8 percent and 43.7 percent in 2012, respectively. The lowest fresh water consumption percentage of renewable water resources was in Kazakhstan - 28.9%.

At a joint press conference with his Kazakhstani counterpart in Tashkent on June 15, President Karimov said: "Today, we formulated a common position in regards to fair water use in Central Asia, based on the solution of water and energy problems exclusively through strict observance of generally recognized norms of international law and taking into account the interests of all states in the region."

Karimov stressed that any hydroelectric facilities planned for construction upstream, such as Rogun and Kambarata, should undergo an international and independent expert examination under UN auspices and should be agreed with the downstream countries along the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers. Karimov pointed out that the two plants would be constructed in earthquake-prone areas and they endanger the lower lands with flooding.

Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed a dialogue and offered concrete help to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in solving their energy problems: "We want to send a friendly message to our neighbors that we ourselves need to address these issues together. There are no unsolvable problems and issues. ... We are ready to meet you halfway. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have transport and energy issues. We are also prepared to deal with these issues."

Astana is obviously concerned by Kyrgyzstan's plans to build the Kambarata Dam since Kazakhstan's southern regions depend on the Syr Darya for irrigation. But the common position with Tashkent on the use of trans-border waters will also serve Astana in addressing China's intensified use of rivers flowing into Kazakhstan's north.

According to experts, China's development plans for its northern and northwestern regions, if completed, threaten the north of Kazakhstan with drought. The environmentally focused non-governmental organization EcoSOS estimates that Kazakhstan could face an ecological disaster in the next 10-20 years if it fails to solve the issue of joint use of the Ili and Irtysh rivers with China.

According to Ainur Kumatova, adviser to Kazakhstan's minister of the environment, China plans to increase water supplies in its northwestern provinces from the current 555 billion cubic meters to 888 billion by 2030, thus reducing water flow to Kazakhstan from the Ili and Irtysh rivers, which supply Lake Balkhash. In December 2012, negotiations with China turned sour after Beijing proposed a water division scheme according to the number of inhabitants living along the river in each country. Astana turned down the proposal and is seeking regional alliances to address the problem.

Nazarbayev's recent trip to Tashkent shows that Kazakhstan is clearly working to apply a regional approach to resolving the water security problems throughout Central Asia.