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BORDER ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN THE NEIGHBOURS IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE CASE OF VORUKH

The current situation in the Vorukh enclave, located in the Ferghana Valley, whose borders are clearly disputed by the two Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, seems rather complicated. Like many other enclaves within Central Asia, Vorukh has high unemployment rates and other socio-economic issues endemic for this region. The enclave turned into the major ignition point for border clashes between the Kyrgyz and Tajik forces for the last few decades.

The article examines both tangible and intangible factors that contribute to the tensions between the two states. Factors of ethnic and national identification are surveyed to understand certain actions, views and values of the belligerents during violent border incidents. The border incidents between Bishkek and Dushanbe might be described as interstate, intergovernmental and in some cases interethnic collision. One of the most important steps to resolve the matter is to engage in constructive dialogue and negotiations between the parties involved. This would require a feasible platform for open discussions of the issues, concerns, and grievances of each group, and political willingness to work towards mutually acceptable solutions.

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Key words: Central Asia, Kyrgyz-Tajik border clashes, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Vorukh enclave.

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Орталық Азиядағы көршілес елдер арасындағы шекаралық шиеленістер: Ворух жағдайы

Ферғана алқабында орналасқан және шекаралары екі Орталық Азия Республикасы, Қырғызстан және Тәжікстан арасында даулы деп есептелетін Ворух анклавындағы қазіргі жағдай өте күрделі болып табылады. Орталық Азиядағы көптеген басқа анклавтар сияқты, Ворух жұмыссыздықтың жоғары деңгейімен және осы аймаққа тән басқа да әлеуметтік-экономикалық мәселелермен ерекшеленеді. Соңғы бірнеше онжылдықта анклав қырғыз және тәжік күштері арасындағы шекара шиеленістерінің басты нүктесіне айналды.

Мақалада көршілес екі мемлекет арасындағы соғыс қимылдарын ынталандыратын материалдық және материалдық емес факторлар зерттелінді. Шекарадағы орын алған шиеленіс оқиғалары барысында соғысушы тараптардың белгілі бір әрекеттерін, көзқарастары мен құндылықтарын түсіну үшін этникалық және ұлттық сәйкестендіру факторлары да қарастырылды. Бішкек пен Душанбе арасындағы шекаралық оқиғаларды мемлекетаралық, үкіметаралық және кейбір жағдайларда этносаралық қақтығыстар деп сипаттауға болады. Бұл мәселені шешудің маңызды қадамдарының бірі – қатысушы тараптар арасындағы сындарлы диалог пен олардың келіссөздерге қатысуы. Бұл әр топтың мәселелерін, алаңдаушылықтары мен наразылықтарын ашық талқылау үшін нақты платформаны, сондай-ақ өзара қолайлы шешімдерді табу үшін жұмыс істеуге саяси дайындықты қажет етеді.

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Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, Қырғыз-Тәжік шекара қақтығыстары, Қырғызстан, Тәжікстан, Ворух анклав.

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Пограничные столкновения между соседями в Центральной Азии: случай Воруха

Текущая ситуация в анклаве Ворух, расположенного в Ферганской долине и границы которого оспариваются двумя Центрально-Азиатскими республиками, Кыргызстаном и Таджикистаном, представляется довольно сложной. Как и многие другие анклавы в Центральной Азии, Ворух отличается высоким уровнем безработицы и другими социально-экономическими проблемами, характерными для этого региона. За последние несколько десятилетий анклав превратился в главную очаговую точку пограничных столкновений между кыргызскими и таджикскими силами

В статье рассматриваются как материальные, так и нематериальные факторы, стимулирующие военные действия между двумя соседними государствами. Факторы этнической и национальной идентификации рассматриваются для понимания определенных действий, взглядов и ценностей воюющих сторон во время вооруженных пограничных инцидентов. Пограничные инциденты между Бишкеком и Душанбе можно охарактеризовать как межгосударственные, межправительственные, а в некоторых случаях и межэтнические столкновения. Одним из наиболее важных шагов для решения этого вопроса является участие вовлеченных сторон в конструктивном диалоге и переговорах. Это потребовало бы реальной платформы для открытого обсуждения вопросов, озабоченностей и недовольств каждой группы, а также политической готовности работать над поиском взаимоприемлемых решений.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Кыргызско-Таджикские пограничные столкновения, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан, анклав Ворух.

Introduction

Central Asia harbours over 76 million people today, with 19 million of them residing in the Ferghana valley. Ferghana valley became known as the most complex and challenging areas of Central Asia where the borders of the three countries converge: those of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The area is considered as densely populated with strong Islamic influence permeating all aspects of life.

All three nationalities, including other ethnicities had been living side by side for generations, sharing similar cultures, traditions, religious practices, resources and other. Moreover, Ferghana Valley inhabitants also share common history: Soviet legacy of an inaccurate division of borders, with some still presenting an unresolvable matter today. One should bear in mind the fact that currently existing border issues with enclaves and exclaves in Central Asia had long emerged as the result of historical decisions taken by Moscow during the Soviet times.

Over the last 30 years, there were a number of hostile encounters between Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Uzbeks due to the unresolved border issues between the three countries. However, the diligent efforts by the Uzbek leadership had resulted in Tashkent resolving its border issues (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan reportedly reaches border settlement, 2019). Bishkek and Dushanbe have yet to accomplish that.

The process of demarcation and delimitation of the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is far

from complete, in fact one can say that it's proceeding slowly and continues facing numerous challenges. 470 km out of the 971 km of the common border still remains to be settled (Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Conflict, 2022).

Research methodology

The present paper would examine both tangible and intangible factors that drive hostilities between the two neighbouring nations by studying the case of the Vorukh enclave. Also, the way how unfriendly border encounters rapidly reach high escalation point suggest an interesting question per se. Ethnic and national identification factors had been surveyed to comprehend certain actions, views and values of the belligerents during violent border incidents.

The data collected came mostly from the secondary sources, like books, monographs, research papers and news articles. The structure of the paper involves the general background information about the Vorukh enclave located in the Ferghana valley whose borders appear to be contested by the two Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Then the paper provides the brief outline of the border hostilities between 2019-2022, followed by the detailed narrative of the reasons for the border clashes.

The application of negative peace theory to the case of Vorukh reveals that peaceful periods are facilitated by the absence of clashes and outbreaks

of violence (Lawler, 2008). The preservation of negative peace is further supported by endeavours in conflict mediation and the analysis of conflict causes, which aim to curtail the resources available for violence. However, the absence of a willingness to cooperate, crucial element of positive peace, is noticeably lacking in the case of Vorukh. To investigate this further, a methodological framework based on constructivism theory can be employed, focusing on how government representatives and publicly popular narratives shape the identity of states and their citizens (McDonald, 2008). In the context of Vorukh, this framework can explore how the flow of conflicts have influenced the identities of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The authors tried to avoid any political, social, economic or cultural biases related to both object and subject of the research. The implications and results are based strictly upon the data collected and analysed in the fields of international relations, regional studies and the modern history of the post-Soviet space.

Vorukh as key component of the border tensions

The key point of the border dispute revolves around the Vorukh enclave, geographically located in Kyrgyzstan. Like many other enclaves within Central Asia, Vorukh has high unemployment rates and other socio-economic issues endemic for this region. The enclave turned into the major ignition point for border clashes between the Kyrgyz and Tajik forces for the last few decades (How Vorukh became an “enclave”. The history of the Tajik-Kyrgyz conflict, 2021).

With over 30 000 Tajik inhabitants, the enclave is practically surrounded by small Kyrgyz villages of the challenging Batken district (On the border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: war, grief and the risk of conflict recurrence, 2022).

It is important to note that both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan present rather homogeneous societies. Despite sharing many commonalities, the two nations can easily identify each other by the language, appearance and other cultural nuances, invisible for the external observers.

It appears that people in Ferghana valley, mostly rural and agricultural, less-industrialized, had adopted specific mentality and distinctive mindset. They can be extremely conservative in terms of religious thinking and highly sensitive when it comes to sharing the land resources, including water, pastures and grazing land. Unlike urban population, they believe

that land, soil, water belong to strictly divided communities, with their unique sense of identity. It also contributes to numerous misunderstandings and hostile encounters between people, in some cases leading to the point of escalation that further results in the armed clashes (Muzalevsky, 2014).

Ferghana valley also became known as the breeding ground for thousands of Islamic militants who left to fight alongside Islamic State in the Middle East. Smuggling and drug trafficking also play an increasingly destabilising role.

High unemployment, low social mobility and deteriorating education and healthcare systems are critical factors for the poor living standards and loss of hope for many people, particularly the young generation. Most of the residents leave their countries to seek employment elsewhere; mostly in countries like Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and other.

First, the pandemic of COVID-19 and now the ongoing war in Ukraine resulted in straining socio-economic issues even further: advancing higher inflation, steady increase of the world commodity prices, higher volatility of the national currencies and unpredictable geopolitical situation.

The region itself is a home to diverse array of ethnic communities, including Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and others, each with their own distinct language, culture and historical ties to the land. In case of Ferghana valley, both Kyrgyz and Tajik people had been asserting their historical claims to the disputed territories, citing their ethnic and cultural ties to the land.

Experts usually cite several reasons for recurrence of border incidents between Bishkek and Dushanbe. Among them:

- The lack of clear, concrete agreements between the governments of both countries on the delimitation of the border and its management (Najibullah, 2023);
- Both countries prefer pursuing their own national interests rather than focusing on border settlement process;
- Different maps the parties consult: on Soviet maps from the 1920s, Vorukh is connected to Tajikistan. But in 1948 it suddenly turned into an enclave within Kyrgyzstan. Tajik experts apply maps of 1924–1939, while Kyrgyz experts apply 1958–1959 maps to determine the border division (How Vorukh became an “enclave”. The history of the Tajik-Kyrgyz conflict, 2021);
- Regular change of the leadership in Bishkek which results in failed attempts to resolve the issue;

- High rates of unemployment and low standards of living for rural population;
- Possible redistribution of the drug trafficking business in the region, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, the assessment that requires additional evidence.

Regional observers note, that border clashes are getting more violent; the damage proportion to the civilians and private property increase exponentially too. For example, on January 27, 2022 several Kyrgyz villages were left without electricity as a result of heavy shelling.

One of deadly border incident occurred on April 28-29, 2021. The incident began with the installation of CCTV cameras on the Golovnoy water distribution canal. Kyrgyzstan announced 31 dead and 132 injured; Tajikistan: about 15 killed and 100 wounded. Over 27 thousand people were forced to evacuate (Marchaud, 2021).

On January 27, 2022 the border guards of Tajikistan blocked the Batken-Isfana road: the Kyrgyz reacted. Parties got engaged in small scale border clash. Among the different reasons listed, it was about an attempt to gain control over the strategic crossroad of Tort-Kocho, which in legal terms belongs to no specific state. It connects Vorukh enclave with Tajikistan, including other big cities in Kyrgyzstan, namely Isfana, Batken, Osh and Bishkek. Experienced residents of the nearby villages began an immediate evacuation in fear of the conflict escalation (Guards clash again on Kyrgyz-Tajik border, ceasefire falters, 2022).

In September 2022, Kyrgyz and Tajik forces clashed in one of the bloodiest border incidents in recent history. Kyrgyz media claims that it was Tajik side that started the attack on 13 September. Three days later, the border guards opened fire across the entire border line in Ferghana valley. The incident resulted in over 60 lives lost, close to 200 people injured and hundred buildings, cars and important infrastructure objects like hospitals, schools, etc, destroyed; most of the casualties were among the border guards, police and emergency workers. Residents of seven villages in Batken and Leylek districts fled their homes, including the villages of Dzhekendi and Chon-Alai of the Osh region.

The border clashes in September 2022 were depicted almost as the inter-governmental war due to the number of casualties and destruction involved (Kyrgyzstan/Tajikistan: Apparent War Crimes in Border Conflict, 2023). So far, the true culprits have not yet been identified as both parties continue their information campaign. Both sides had been vehe-

mently blaming and accusing each other for escalation. For example, Kyrgyz claimed that there were unidentified fighters with no clear insignia among Tajik combatants with some of them suspected to be of Afghan origin. Tajik military personnel supplied the civilians with arms to attack and plunder their Kyrgyz neighbours. Also, Tajik forces used heavy artillery, tanks and multiple launch rocket systems against their Kyrgyz counterparts (Busack, 2022).

After September 2022 events, the relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan strained even further. Almost immediately, two countries stopped issuing mutual education scholarships; over 700 Tajik students had to abandon their studies in Kyrgyzstan. The border between the two states had been closed (Kyrgyzstan border crossings, 2023).

Exploring tangible and intangible factors of the violence

Overall, schools, houses, gas stations, checkpoints, cars, shops and other critical infrastructure objects was destroyed or severely damaged over the past few years (Singh Y., 2023). It appears as random violence, as acts of hatred and hostility between the warring parties. However, it also reveals deep seated misunderstandings and complex socioeconomic factors related to the general mistrust between the sides.

As was already mentioned, the border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is a complex issue with multiple underlying factors that have contributed to its escalation. While the recent clashes in April and September 2022 resulted in the destruction of various material objects, it is essential to recognize that this conflict is not just a matter of random violence or hostility. According to experts such as Toktomushev, Kozlovski and Parham, the primary reasons for the conflict include control over land and water resources, issues with demarcation due to poorly managed borders, including the lack of cooperation between the two states (Toktomushev, 2018; Kozlovski, 2016; Parham, 2016).

Dadabayev also suggests that unilateral government decisions on border delimitation have contributed to the prolonged conflict and overall distress among the population in the contested areas (Dadabaev, 2015). Moreover, the lack of clear boundaries and the presence of mixed populations have created fertile ground for misunderstandings and disagreements, leading to further friction and violence. In other words, the borders of Central Asian states today do not fully correspond to their ethnic composition. This factor made the demarcation process increasingly challenging.

One can also mention competition for the resource availability, as one of the most prominent tangible factors of the discord between the two countries, namely land and water. This is partly caused by difference in population density. Although the average population density of Tajikistan is 71.3 people per square kilometre, the figure is much higher in the border areas around Vorukh. There is a rather noticeable population density difference on the border area, with 16,6 people living per 1 square kilometre on the Kyrgyz side against 251,6 people in Tajikistan (Luchterhandt, 2022). In terms of the growth rate, Tajikistan ranks first among all other post-Soviet countries. The population of Tajikistan as of January 1, 2023 reached 10 million 162 thousand people (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Population Division, 2023). Population growth, particularly in rural areas results in the limited access to resources. To explain further: 93% of Tajikistan's territory is mountainous with the remaining 7% containing river basins, suitable for agriculture and human habitation. And even these areas are shrinking in size due to the population explosion and ongoing climate change implications. More land is required to generate housing, jobs, production of food; at the same time natural resources, like arable soil, water and biodiversity, are in steady decline (Karaev, 2021).

Rural communities of the Ferghana valley rely heavily on agricultural production in terms of their livelihood. And today this very livelihood is put under tremendous strain due to the overall shortage of water, glacier melting, exacerbated by the climate change. This puts additional burden upon the struggling economies as key labour involves the agri-food production, trade (export of agricultural production, etc) and maintaining the livestock. Severe droughts occur too frequently and rapid glacier melting is dwindling the region's available water resources even further.

Strong affiliation with the land determines the mindset of the rural inhabitants. And this mindset can be listed as an intangible factor contributing to the existing tensions. For example, Kyrgyz believe that they should protect the exclusive right to exploit the resources located in Kyrgyzstan's territory, similarly to how Tajiks and Uzbeks think in relation to their respective lands.

Ethnic identity played a significant role in fueling tensions and conflicts between Kyrgyz and Tajik border communities. Ethnic identity refers to a person's subjective sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group and the associated cultural norms,

values, beliefs, and practices that are shared within that group (Phinney, 1992; Tajfel, Turner, 1979). Ethnic identity can be viewed as a multifaceted construct that includes an individual's self-identification with a particular ethnic group, their knowledge of cultural heritage, attitudes toward the culture, and behaviour related to their ethnic group (Phinney, 1992).

Understanding the current ethnic identity of Ferghana valley, Vorukh or other similar enclaves is difficult due to simultaneous coexistence and conflict-proneness. The Ferghana Valley is a region where three significant ethnic groups, namely Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tajiks, live together in a complex system of interrelated communities that share common burial grounds, grazing areas, and markets (Toktamushev, 2018). In addition, the region is characterized by ethnic and political boundaries that do not always align with each other.

One cannot deny the fact of a certain degree of enmity existing today between Kyrgyz and Tajik people residing nearby the undefined borders. National identification, rather than ethnic belonging of the belligerents might provide answer to that. For example, Parham suggests that "nationality" of one is expressed in "citizenship" of conflict partakers in Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict (Parham, 2016). People, involved in local small range conflicts over the use of land are said to often refer to the citizenship when discussing the "theft" of land. This might suggest that the role of ethnic identity as major element of conflict around Vorukh and other surrounding border areas is archaic. One can suppose that ethnic enmity is reinforced by border conflicts.

The border conflict between Bishkek and Dushanbe cannot help inducing the emergence of certain perception of "us" and "them" which leads to new type of discussion about the possible new identity that encompasses both ethnic and national identification. Here we talk about "them" or enemy referring to those willing to claim "our" or national resources. According to Matveeva, borders serve as locations where communities project their fears onto each other (Matveeva, 2017). These fears can range from being trapped and surrounded to the loss of territory, assets, and resources. Fear, in this sense, becomes a driving force for identity formation in cross-border communities. It reinforces the perception of collective insecurity even during peaceful times and leads to the development of robust ethnic borderland identities, supported by new nationalistic ideologies and associations that pit "us" against "them."

Presence of such identity division, the very existence and acknowledgement of “us” and “them” predisposes the area to conflict, makes it rather conflict prone. The evidence is clearly seen with the Kyrgyz-Tajik border issues, where violent outbreaks re-emerge each year; at least April 2021 and September 2022 events showcase the most explicit examples of violence. The latest episode in September 2022 was especially identity-tied, with ever increasing sense of enmity between Tajik and Kyrgyz people. This was partly due to controversy of information warfare as well as cyber bullying in social media platforms, where both sides had been portraying each other as instigators, violent attackers and so on. The discovery of sabotaged news pieces further increased the enmity between two nations, especially among the online-engaged and active youth (Mirsalimov, 2021).

National identification involves sense of national belonging and how individuals “identify themselves within the boundaries of specific nationhood and corresponding statehood” (Yang, 2014).

Constructivism predisposes the idea that security is a social construction and puts “identity” as non-material, in other words intangible factor at the heart of the discourse about security practices (Williams, McDonald, 2023). The Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict is partly driven by individuals’ loyalty and commitment to the supreme entity, based on a social contract between the individual and the state, with rights and obligations that each carry. Therefore, state symbols, state structures and human units that represent State come under attack first: as in the case of violent outbreaks during the border clashes. If we closely look at the casualty statistics, both Kyrgyz and Tajik border guards usually take most of the damage, including the police, firefight and other emergency services (One was killed, 27 injured. Tension on the border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, 2019).

Other examples include attacks against the state symbols. During the 2019 border clashes, the State Border Service of Kyrgyzstan reported that citizens of Tajikistan attempted to raise a flagpole on an unmarked section of the border near the inscription “Vorukh,” which displeased the residents of the Kyrgyz village of Ak-Sai. According to the statement by the Press Center of the Border Troops of the State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan, Kyrgyz nationals prevented the installation of the flag and “illegally installed the inscription “Ok-sai” with the flag of their country. In response the residents of Vorukh protested (One was killed, 27

injured. Tension on the border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, 2019).

On the other hand, both Kyrgyz and Tajik people identify themselves as Muslims which might become strong unifying factor and help in the process of final resolution of the conflict.

Conclusion

We can still describe the border incidents between Bishkek and Dushanbe as interstate, inter-governmental and in some cases interethnic collision. Both tangible (maps, agreements, land, water, pastures, roads, etc) and intangible factors (political will, ethnic and national identification, soft power, information warfare, etc) were examined to understand hostilities between the two neighbouring nations.

These unfriendly border encounters continue to represent grave financial burden for the two most economically disadvantaged countries in the region, manifesting as a detrimental blow to their respective national budgets. In the context of complex geo-economic situation, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan simply cannot afford such costly incidents.

One of the most important steps to resolve the matter is to engage in constructive dialogue and negotiations between the parties involved. This would require a feasible platform for open discussions of the issues, concerns, and grievances of each group, and political willingness to work towards mutually acceptable solutions. The leadership of both countries should agree to cooperate on bilateral level, as no other regional organization can force their partnership, nor can introduce any universal solution.

The governments of both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan should take into account the entire plethora of tangible and intangible factors that persist in fueling the border incidents. Addressing these underlying issues would require developing sustainable strategies to promote economic growth, employment opportunities, and access to basic services in the region. Promoting interethnic tolerance and respect for human rights with the help of education, media, and other platforms might also help to reduce tensions and build more positive relationships between the communities.

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