

Kristiina Silvan, *Research Fellow, FIIA*

WATER AND FIRE AT THE KYRGYZ-TAJIK BORDER

FERGHANA VALLEY'S SECURITY ENVIRONMENT COULD TAKE A TURN FOR THE WORSE

The latest clash between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan casts a shadow over the region's already fragile security situation. The simmering conflict in Central Asia's Fergana Valley could potentially escalate into an open armed conflict between the two states.

In the heart of Central Asia lies the densely populated Fergana Valley. The borders of three post-Soviet states, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, meander through the valley, which is also home to numerous enclaves. Many of the borders are disputed, which fuels inter-ethnic contestation. Tensions are high, especially in the spring irrigation season when access to land and water is essential for making a living.

The latest incident started as a row at the water facility in territory claimed by both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. On 28 April 2021, local civilians from both sides threw stones at each other. The conflict then escalated quickly and somewhat unexpectedly: border guards got involved in the fighting rather

than trying to suppress it, and the next day, military from both sides exchanged fire. By the time a ceasefire had taken effect, the number of confirmed casualties had risen to 52 dead and 279 wounded. Since much of the fighting took place on the Kyrgyz side of the border, material and human – mostly civilian – casualties were heavier there, with observers pointing to Tajikistan as the “winner” in the conflict. On 3 May, troops on both sides were withdrawn.

Against the backdrop of the Fergana Valley's history, it is easy to assume that there was nothing new in the conflict. The borders of present-day Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were arbitrarily drawn in the Soviet era. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, the administrative

borders were automatically transformed into state borders, which sparked criticism on both sides. Negotiations between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been ongoing since 2002, and yet 40% of the 971-km bilateral border remains disputed. Over 150 conflicts have been reported on the bilateral border in the past decade.

Even if conflicts in the Fergana Valley appear to be ethnic, they are rooted in material concerns. Land and water shortages in the region have increased in recent years as a result of population growth and climate change. To pressure the other side, local residents commonly block shared water channels and interstate roads. Moreover, everyday life is further complicated by rampant corruption and drug trafficking.

Yet April’s escalation can be better explained by a combination of short-term factors. The legitimacy of Kyrgyzstan’s recently elected President Sadyr Japarov is based on nationalist and populist claims. Each of his government’s border deal plans – such as swapping Tajikistan’s lush Vorukh exclave for a dry strip of land in Kyrgyzstan’s Batken district – has been completely unacceptable to Tajikistan. In early April, Kyrgyzstan conducted an extensive military exercise at the Tajik border. There has been talk of taking a unilateral decision to build a new water reservoir in Kyrgyzstan, which, if it materialized, would be a severe blow to Tajikistan’s water management system.

It seems plausible that the rhetoric and actions of the Kyrgyz authorities caused genuine concern in Tajikistan and prompted its leadership to prepare for a potential border conflict. Alternatively, some commentators argue that President Emomali Rakhmon was eager to demonstrate Tajikistan’s military capabilities in a “small victorious war” in order to boost his domestic support.

Although it may appear bilateral, the conflict has broader implications. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Yet both the CSTO and Russia seemed reluctant to mediate. While it is entirely possible that Russia has worked behind the scenes to pressure the two warring sides to de-escalate – after all, the prime ministers of both countries happened to be in Kazan, Russia when the conflict erupted, and Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov reached out to both Japarov and Rakhmon – there is no telling whether Russia would take the initiative in forging a sustainable border resolution. In any case, the fact that Russia’s two regional allies used weapons against each other points to the limits of Russia’s potential for persuasion.

Despite the quickly negotiated ceasefire, the worst may be yet to come.

The Ferghana Valley can become another hotbed for a frozen conflict. Tension over water sharing will not disappear. In the near future, the political situation will not change radically: in the midst

of an economic recession, neither Tajik nor Kyrgyz leaders seem likely to abandon their nationalist rhetoric. Moreover, the gap and distrust between officials in the capitals and the poverty-stricken local communities implies that even if the leaders were to negotiate a mutually acceptable deal, local residents might reject it outright. In fact, Kyrgyz officials were recently forced to reopen negotiations over a border deal sealed with the Uzbeks after the residents of one border community in the Kara-Suu district of Osh Province refused to abide by it.

Given that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are unable to resolve their border issues on their own and no external actor powerful enough has demonstrated the will and ability to mediate, no ceasefire can be seen as permanent. Although a full-scale inter-state war is unlikely, the latest round of hostilities looks worrying. Considering that the conflicting states are located in the immediate vicinity of an unstable Afghanistan that is preparing for US troop withdrawal, the issue deserves much more international attention than it has received thus far. /