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Central Asian Water Cooperation after COVID-19: Could the Impact of the Pandemic Challenge the Achievements of the Recent ‘Water Thaw’?

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Central Asian Water Cooperation after COVID-19: Could the Impact of the Pandemic Challenge the Achievements of the Recent ‘Water Thaw’?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of COVID-19 on the recent positive turn in the dynamics of regional water cooperation (the so-called ‘water thaw’) in Central Asia, starting from the research question whether the pandemic could challenge the emerging cooperation of the ‘water thaw’. In order to explore this, the analysis is divided into three parts. First, it examines the effects of the pandemic on the economic, social, and political variables influencing water-related issues. The analysis of these intervening variables shows how the adverse impact of the pandemic on different areas has the potential to challenge regional water cooperation. In the second part, the research focuses on recent events and developments related to regional cooperation. Regional cooperation makes another important intervening variable to test the connection between the impact of the pandemic and regional water cooperation because the likelihood of the development of water cooperation is higher when regional cooperation functions well in general. The third part examines the functioning of regional cooperation in two extremely sensitive cases of interstate water-related tensions during the pandemic, namely the Sardoba dam catastrophe in 2020 and the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict in 2021.

Introduction

‘Water is arguably the most important strategic resource of Central Asia in the 21st century.’² This sentence has been repeated at many forums in the past few decades to draw attention to the situation of regional water cooperation in the region that is formed in the basin of the Amu-darya and the Syr-darya by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Until 2016, the looming danger of a ‘water war’ dominated discourse about

¹ Supported by the ÚNKP-20-4 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Innovation and Technology from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund. The author is also grateful to the Corvinus Centre for Central Asia Research for granting her the opportunity to participate in the webinar series ‘Water as a Driver of Sustainable Recovery: Economic, Institutional and Strategic Aspects of Water Resources Management in Central Asia’ (2021), supported by BPCA, SIWI, and CAREC, which inspired this paper.

² Krasznai, Márton, ‘How to Build an Economic and Financial Environment Favourable for the Sustainable Management of Water Resources: Potential Synergies Between National and Regional Policies’ (Speech, Corvinus Centre for Central Asia Research, Budapest, 3 November, 2020).

Central Asia³ while following Shavkat Mirziyoyev's turn in Uzbekistan and the first signs of his radically new direction in regional politics, a 'water thaw' has occupied the principal position in the headlines.⁴

The present research identifies Central Asia as a hydropolitical complex and understands the 'water thaw' in this theoretical framework. Hydropolitical complexes are defined 'as existing when a nation's dependence on shared water systems (...) is of such a strategic nature that this dependence starts to drive interstate relations of potential cooperation (amity) or competition (enmity) in a discernable manner'.⁵ They 'exist above the basin level but below the level of any regional political and economic cooperative structures that might be in place'.⁶ The units in such regions are in tight interdependence concerning their shared water resources, while the attitude of their surroundings is relatively indifferent towards them.⁷ In a hydropolitical complex, water issues may become securitised and take a trajectory to enmity, where competition, rivalry, tensions, and potential conflict determine regional relations, creating a hydropolitical security complex.⁸ On the other hand, cooperative tendencies based on amity are intertwined with the joint politicisation and/or desecuritisation of water issues. According to Kehl, hydropolitical complexes 'emerge to negotiate water-sharing policies that promote political stability, regional security, economic prosperity, and environmental sustainability',⁹ which goes hand in hand with the increasing potential of further regional cooperation. Progress in regional cooperation in these areas catalyses the development of a hydropolitical complex based on amity, while deteriorating levels of willingness to settle issues in a joint and consensual manner in general may jeopardise regional water-related initiatives. Thus, any variables that negatively affect regional cooperation in hydropolitical complexes are likely to have an impact on regional water cooperation as well.

The concept can be applied to Central Asia well, where we cannot talk about properly functioning regional water regimes¹⁰ or about regionalism in the classical sense,¹¹ while the dependence on shared water systems influences interstate cooperation and competition to a

³ Micklin, Philip, 'Water in the Aral Sea Basin of Central Asia: Cause of Conflict or Cooperation?', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 43, no. 7 (October 1, 2002): 505–28; Bichsel, Christine, 'Liquid Challenges: Contested Water in Central Asia', *Sustainable Development Law & Policy*, 12, no. 1 (2011): 24–30, 58–60; Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Water and Conflict* (30 May, 2002); Crisis Group, *Water Pressures in Central Asia* (11 September, 2014).

⁴ Pannier, Bruce, 'Rare Central Asian Summit Signals Regional Thaw', *RFE/RL* (15 March, 2018); Pannier, Bruce, 'Afghanistan, Coronavirus Lend Extra Weight to Central Asian Leaders' Summit', *RFE/RL* (9 August, 2021); Szálkai, Kinga, 'Resetting Water Relations in Central Asia: The Perspectives of Uzbekistan's Cooperative Foreign Policy Turn.', *OSCE Academy Policy Brief 74* (July, 2021).

⁵ Turton, Anthony, 'A South African Perspective on a Possible Benefit-Sharing Approach for Transboundary Waters in the SADC Region', *Water Alternatives* 1, no. 2 (2008): 188.

⁶ Turton, Anthony, and Ashton, Peter, 'Basin Closure and Issues of Scale: The Southern African Hydropolitical Complex', *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 24, no. 2 (2008): 305.

⁷ Turton, Anthony, 'A Hydropolitical Complex as a Factor in the International Relations of Contemporary Southern Africa.' Cambridge Paper. Centre for International Political Studies (CIPS)/African Water Issues Research Unit (AWIRU) (University of Pretoria, 2009).

⁸ Schulz, Michael, 'Turkey, Syria and Iraq: A Hydropolitical Security Complex.' In: *Hydropolitics: Conflicts over Water as a Development Constraint*, 91–122. Ed.: Ohlsson, Leif (Zed Books, London, 1995); Marton, Péter, and Szálkai, Kinga, 'Against the Current: Deconstructing the Upstream/Downstream Binary in Hydropolitical Security Complexes', *New Perspectives* 25, no. 3 (2017): 15–41.

⁹ Kehl, Jenny, 'Hydropolitical Complexes and Asymmetrical Power: Conflict, Cooperation, and Governance of International River Systems', *Journal of World-Systems Research* 17, no. 1 (2011): 218.

¹⁰ Pohl, Benjamin, Annika Kramer, William Hull, Sabine Blumstein, Iskandar Abdullaev, Jusipbek Kazbekov, Tais Reznikova, Ekaterina Strikeleva, Eduard Interwies, and Stefan Görlitz, 'Rethinking Water in Central Asia: The Costs of Inaction and Benefits of Water Cooperation' (Berlin: adelphi and CAREC, 2017).

¹¹ Costa Buranelli, Filippo, 'Central Asian Regionalism or Central Asian Order? Some Reflections', *Central Asian Affairs*, 8, no. 1 (2021a): 1–26.

visible extent. The ‘water thaw’ that started out from Uzbekistan’s foreign policy change and has led to a process of desecuritising and re-politicizing water issues on the regional level, was made possible by the high-level interdependence in the region. As President Islam Karimov’s conflictual attitude, which incited and conserved regional enmity, was replaced by current President Mirziyoyev’s cooperative direction, the states of the region responded in an amiable way, and the joint management of previously harshly contested water resources became conceivable in the discourses of water diplomacy. The positive tendencies of the last few years also demonstrate that the development of regional cooperation in general serves as an incentive for regional water-related initiatives.

It is beyond doubt that the recent Central Asian détente has been a significant turning point in regional water diplomacy, and the latest high-level declarations about the commitment of the leaders of the five republics to develop transboundary water cooperation in a joint way to the benefit of each stakeholder in the region are good reasons for optimism. However, the emerging ‘water thaw’ was apparently halted by COVID-19 in March 2020, and since then, the issue of regional water cooperation has mostly been relegated to the background. This is not only unfortunate in terms of delaying the implementation of the proposed developments and constraining ways of continuing cooperation, it also puts new pressure on the already strained water infrastructure of the region, increasing the cost of inactivity and the delay of a comprehensive regional water reform.

The measures introduced in Central Asian states to counter the pandemic are apt to challenge the developing spirit of regional cooperation in general as well, affecting its benefits for water relations. The economic downturn that has followed has the direct potential to significantly hinder water cooperation, as it constrains the available resources for the development and maintenance of the water infrastructure, and it increases tension within Central Asian societies. Policy makers had already been in a difficult situation concerning the allocation of scarce financial resources before the pandemic, and the newly emerging challenges have made the related decisions even more trying. In the meantime, the domestic structural changes which are necessary to reform the regional water management system also need considerable investment. The stability of governments is crucial at a time of regional restructuring, and the trust of the population can be of key importance for the implementation of the proposed changes in the domestic water sector; however, the impact of COVID-19 seems to have the potential to undermine both. Thus, the question arises: how do these circumstances influence the recent achievements in regional water cooperation?

The present research studies the impact of the pandemic on the dynamics of water relations in Central Asia, starting from the research question whether the pandemic could challenge the emerging cooperation of the ‘water thaw’. In order to explore this, the analysis is divided into three parts. The first part examines the effects of the pandemic on the economic, social, and political variables influencing water-related issues. The analysis of these intervening variables shows how the adversary impact of the pandemic on different areas has the potential to influence regional water cooperation negatively. In the second part, the research focuses on recent events and developments related to regional cooperation. Regional cooperation makes another important intervening variable to test the connection between the impact of the pandemic and regional water cooperation because the likelihood of the development of water cooperation is higher when regional cooperation functions well in general. The third part examines the functioning of regional cooperation in two extremely sensitive cases of interstate water-related tensions during the pandemic, namely the Sardoba dam catastrophe in 2020 and the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict in 2021. This part of the analysis investigates how regional leaders reacted on emerging water-related tensions during COVID-19, and whether they exploited the recently developing tendencies of regional cooperation to

mitigate conflict. The conclusion provides a review of the implications of the analysed phenomena regarding the ‘water thaw’.

I. The Impact of COVID-19 on the Central Asian Water Sector

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit Central Asia in multiple waves since March 2020, the most serious of which emerged in summer 2021. Although the official data presented by the governments do not give a clear and comprehensive picture about the situation,¹² it can be assumed that the virus has claimed a high toll in the region in terms of both human lives and economic costs.

Each of the five countries have introduced restrictions to protect their population from the pandemic, which affected regional relations. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have shown more willingness to act quickly, while Tajikistan was more hesitant about confirming the presence of the pandemic, and Turkmenistan imposed protective regulations, maintaining that no cases of COVID-19 have been identified there. The reactions and the introduced policies have varied, but each state has had to experience restrictions of international travel, trade, and labour migration, quarantine measures, and the long-term impact of strengthened border control. Constraints on domestic economic and social life, measures to protect the economy, and further policy responses to support the most vulnerable groups have also been introduced in each of the five republics, although to a different extent and with different degrees of efficiency.¹³ Such measures have directly hindered intraregional communication, and their long-term effects have been observable in the case of several economic, social, and political variables which influence the dynamics of regional water cooperation.

The Central Asian states had not been prepared for such a large-scale crisis, and, mostly due to their long-standing structural issues, the resilience of their economies facing the emerging extraordinary challenges was rather low. The pandemic has had a negative impact on the drivers of the moderate economic growth characterizing the region in the past years,¹⁴ and it has reduced domestic consumption to a substantial extent, initiating a serious economic crisis. The disturbances in global and regional supply chains have incurred further significant losses, while the measures introduced to mitigate the impact of the crisis have rapidly consumed additional resources. The financial cost of COVID-19 does not only involve the amount of money directly invested in crisis management processes. Emergency funding also means the reallocation of budgets and the diversion of assets from other sectors, which, in

¹² As of October 2021, Kazakhstan counts more than a million confirmed cases and almost 17,000 deaths, with 40 percent of the population is vaccinated. In Kyrgyzstan, the number of confirmed cases is 180,000, while the number of deaths has passed 2,600, and only 11 percent is vaccinated. In Uzbekistan, the number of confirmed cases is 184,233, the number of deaths is 1,300, and the percentage of the vaccinated is 17.5 percent. Tajikistan counts 17,486 confirmed cases and 125 deaths, and there is no official data on vaccination. Turkmenistan is not on the list of the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Centre, 2021).

¹³ ‘COVID-19 Crisis Response in Central Asia,’ OECD, 16 November, 2020; Pannier, Bruce, ‘Central Asian Countries Use Different Strategies to Deal with Coronavirus Crisis.’, *RFE/RL*, 18 March, 2020a; Gleason, Gregory, and Kuralay, Baizakova, ‘COVID-19 in the Central Asian Region: National Responses and Regional Implications’, *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 19, no. 2 (2020): 101–14.

¹⁴ Turkstra, Alberto, ‘Uzbekistan’s Economic Resilience in the Face of COVID-19’, *EIAS*, 9 June, 2020.

many cases, had been in sore need of budget extensions and extra funds already before the crisis.¹⁵

The water sector is particularly hard-hit by the draining of resources throughout the region, especially as it has not managed to achieve economic and financial sustainability since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The pandemic, on the one hand, has brought increased attention to the importance of the availability of water resources, while also exposing the existing weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the sector. In the following, the paper will review the economic, political, and social impact of COVID-19 on the water sector of Central Asian states, and its relationship with regional water cooperation.

1.1. Economic Impact

COVID-19 started an economic crisis in Central Asia that has had more adverse effects than the 2007–2008 global financial crisis.¹⁶ After the first wave of the pandemic, the estimated GDP losses of Central Asian countries were the following: Kazakhstan 5.4 percent, Kyrgyzstan 9.5 percent, Uzbekistan 3.7 percent, Tajikistan 9.6 percent, Turkmenistan 4.6 percent.¹⁷ The economically most devastating impact of the pandemic in the region has been the disruption of supply chains, which has led to a fall in the prices of primary commodities in the international markets, thus influencing the trade indicators of Central Asian countries adversely.¹⁸ The export of the two regional leading powers, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan fell by 22 percent and 13 percent, respectively,¹⁹ and 60–80 percent of the firms in the region have suffered significant damage due to the pandemic.²⁰

In general, state budgets have not only been strained by the cost of the crisis response, but also by currency devaluations and revenue losses (hydrocarbons, remittances, import, and domestic taxes), which has increased fiscal deficits and state debts.²¹ The deteriorating economic situation with increasing debts is likely to adversely affect the accessibility of loans in the longer term. These processes, in turn, constrain both the provision of relief and recovery, and the implementation of government programs planned earlier. In the meantime, relief and recovery measures are often seen as competing with structural reforms and the implementation of the sustainable development agenda, potentially invoking a zero-sum game and jeopardizing not only previous plans but also aims that have already been reached.²²

The Central Asian economic crisis hit a water sector that had already been strained in the previous decades. In the region, a cubic meter of freshwater withdrawal has one of the smallest contributions to the GDP in the world.²³ The impact of climate change further worsened the situation. In the meantime, the maintenance of the inefficient and outdated water management system has incurred significant costs. The situation is likely to deteriorate due to the economic impact of the pandemic and the delay in the processes of modernisation and restructuring it causes. Based on the pre-COVID estimates of the CAREC Institute, Central

¹⁵ ‘COVID-19 and Central Asia: Socio-Economic Impacts and Key Policy Considerations for Recovery’, UNDP in Europe and Central Asia, 16 November, 2020; ‘COVID-19 in North and Central Asia: Impacts, Responses & Strategies to Build Back Better’, ESCAP, 25 February, 2021; Corvinus Centre for Central Asia Research (CCCAR), ‘Water as a Driver of Sustainable Recovery: Economic, Institutional and Strategic Aspects of Water Resources Management in Central Asia’, Webinar Series, Budapest, 2021.

¹⁶ UNDP 2020; OECD 2020.

¹⁷ UNDP 2020: 6.

¹⁸ Gleason, and Baizakova 2020: 104.

¹⁹ OECD 2020. 4.

²⁰ Ibid.: 10.

²¹ UNDP 2020: 9; OECD 2020. 13-14.

²² ESCAP 2021: 4.

²³ CCCAR 2021.

Asia would have needed to invest 33–38 billion USD annually even to maintain the proper functioning of its current water infrastructure²⁴ already at that time – now, since due to the impact of the pandemic the situation is deteriorating, this number is likely to increase. Providing sustainable and efficient management of water on the regional level would be of key importance in the economic recovery after COVID-19 as well. However, the preconditions for this are multifaceted, and each of them is hindered by the pandemic, creating a catch-22 situation for Central Asian leaders interested in the benefits of regional water cooperation in recovery.

The key precondition, often reiterated by donors and other international actors involved in the development of the region,²⁵ is to carry out essential structural and institutional reforms. In order to do these, significant amounts of investment and funding are needed. On the other hand, Central Asian leaders need to be committed and willing to implement their recent promises in terms of water relations in the shortest run possible, regardless of the political cost. The economic impact of COVID-19 has adversely affected these three preconditions, while financial reallocations due to the same economic impact even divert sources previously assigned to tackling domestic water issues and making the outdated system of regional water management more sustainable and efficient. Thus, it is likely to further delay the introduction of long overdue structural reforms in the water sector, increasing the cost of inaction and encouraging the preservation of the current system of water management with its shortcomings. This way, the economic impact of COVID-19 has the clear potential to significantly hinder the development of regional water cooperation as well.

1.2. Social Impact

The impact of COVID-19 on the societies of the states of Central Asia is also in connection with the dynamics of regional water cooperation, and has the potential to influence the future of the ‘water thaw’. The two most important points of connection are water availability and rising social tensions.

The pandemic exposed the issue of water availability and the shortcomings of water management. In 2016, the number of people deprived from proper access was about 7.5 million in Uzbekistan, 4.8 million in Tajikistan, and 2 million in Kyrgyzstan.²⁶ Unequal access to clean drinking water is characteristic of the region.²⁷ The problems of water availability mostly stem from the inefficiencies of water management systems. As for sanitation, the past decades saw significant improvements, but without efficient structures of operation and maintenance, the problems of wastewater systems contribute to the deterioration of water quality. Due to water pollution, water-related infections are fairly common in the region.²⁸ During COVID-19, the significance of safe water supply, sanitation, and hygiene systems has multiplied, and the consequences of the shortcomings and inefficiencies may directly claim more lives. The impact of the pandemic confirmed that the development of water management systems is inevitable, thus it has provided an incentive for water reforms and broader regional cooperation, which are core preconditions for efficiency. However, in the lack of available sources to act upon the growing pressure on water

²⁴ Krasznai 2021.

²⁵ CCCAR 2021.

²⁶ Bekturganov, Zakir, Kamshat Tussupova, Ronny Berndtsson, Nagima Sharapatova, Kapar Aryngazin, and Maral Zhanasova, ‘Water Related Health Problems in Central Asia—A Review’, *Water* 8, no. 6 (2016): 214.

²⁷ CAREC–UNICEF, ‘Research Report: Development of WASH Systems in Rural Areas of the CAREC Region’, May 2021.

²⁸ Bekturganov et al. 2016: 222-227.

management systems, this incentive is likely to turn into a source of increasing frustration and dissatisfaction with state services among the population.²⁹

The pandemic also has indirect effects on the water sector mediated by social factors, the most important of which are rising social tensions. The impact of COVID-19 has deepened pre-existing inequalities in the region, and made traditionally vulnerable groups even more exposed to insecurities, inciting widespread social grievances. The restrictions on contact and mobility disproportionately affected those working in the most vulnerable environments. Unemployment rates rose after the first wave of the pandemic.³⁰ As informal employment is widespread in the region, significant groups of workers are invisible to governments,³¹ which limits their opportunities to access state-provided crisis support or recovery benefits during the pandemic. In the meantime, the restrictions have also hindered the remittances of migrant labourers who provide a living for wide and often vulnerable social groups in the region.³² Closing borders and job opportunities in Russia have also forced a huge number of labour migrants to return to their homes.³³ The arrival of hundreds of thousands unemployed people, mostly men expected to support their families, is likely to further increase social tensions.³⁴

As a consequence of growing unemployment, household incomes are decreasing, while inflation and public debt are on the rise. The Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations reports that there has been a more than 20 percent increase in the price of potatoes and flour in the region since the beginning of the first wave.³⁵ According to the estimates, 1.6 million people may have been pushed into poverty in the region.³⁶ Under the deteriorating circumstances of poverty and unemployment, the pandemic-hit state social protection systems can offer less security and safety, and the future is even less predictable for the vulnerable groups than before.³⁷

In this general atmosphere of growing inequalities, insecurity, and social tensions, the spillover effects of the pandemic are accumulating further. The case of the water sector is extremely sensitive in this respect, firstly because the treatment and prevention of COVID-19 is tightly related to access to water, sanitation, and hygiene. Second, the importance of the water sector in providing employment and welfare for households is also high. Water-related economic branches are the largest employers in Central Asia,³⁸ and hydropower is an important source of energy. The situation of the water sector is thus thoroughly intertwined with job security, and also related to household incomes and livelihood in general as a provider of food and energy security. The impact of the pandemic on the water sector, thus, has the potential to further increase social grievances.

Under the described circumstances, pre-existing water tensions, which had been successfully mitigated by the ‘water thaw’, are more likely to surface, and the development of social tensions in other fields, such as in terms of ethnic relations, may escalate the situation

²⁹ Asian Development Bank (ADB), ‘COVID-19 and Water in Asia and the Pacific: Guidance Note’, July 2021: 23-26.

³⁰ ‘Unemployment’, World Bank Indicators, 2020.

³¹ Radjabov, Bakhrom, ‘Post-COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities for Central Asia’, *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 4 June, 2020.

³² World Bank, ‘COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens’, *Migration and Development Brief*, no. 32. World Bank, Washington DC., 2020: 22.

³³ OECD 2020: 15-16.

³⁴ Gleason, Gregory, ‘Post-Pandemic Central Asia: Moving Beyond ‘Helicopter Money’’, *The Diplomat*, 20 May, 2020.

³⁵ Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, ‘COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme for Europe and Central Asia’, Budapest, 2020.

³⁶ Bjerde, Anna. ‘Envisioning Central Asia’s Green Recovery’, *World Bank*, 1 July, 2021.

³⁷ ESCAP 2021.

³⁸ CCCAR 2021.

further. Social media reflects the growing anger and frustration, and the sporadic protests, which are unusual in the region, also signal the level of tension.³⁹ These grievances may also pose a danger to political stability, although to a different extent in each country.⁴⁰ The disruptive potential of social grievances fuelled by the pandemic was clearly visible in the case of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict in 2021, where disagreements on the use of transboundary waters provided the direct reason for the clashes. Overall, the social impact of COVID-19 is also likely to contribute to the challenges ahead of regional cooperation and the ‘water thaw’ in Central Asia.

1.3. Political Impact

The rising economic and social tension related to the pandemic also poses a great challenge to the political stability of the states of Central Asia. In the atmosphere of political instability, the willingness of governments to invest time, effort, and resources into regional cooperation and to initiate policy changes or structural reforms, especially in such a sensitive area like water, is likely to decrease.

The region is rather exposed to the adverse impact of the pandemic in the political sense. Three of the five Central Asian republics have been recently going through significant political changes. Uzbekistan is in the middle of a long transformation period due to Mirziyoyev’s widespread reforms; Kazakhstan since the resignation of its first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, is in the sensitive state of developing new elites in the shadow of the former charismatic leader; while Kyrgyzstan has experienced multiple political crises and turmoil in the past few years. In the case of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, although their leaders have been in position for decades, the legitimacy of the authoritarian regimes is largely dependent on whether they are able to provide stability and relatively acceptable living conditions for their population, which is particularly challenging during the pandemic. In this atmosphere of political vulnerability, none of the Central Asian governments can allow themselves to openly admit failures and non-delivered promises due to the impact of COVID-19.⁴¹

Nevertheless, official state discourse about the pandemic and the policies to tackle its effects have been aimed at creating support for the legitimacy of the political regimes by demonstrating their competency and diverting attention from issues where this was not possible. As the latter cases were in majority, and the political atmosphere has been rather strained throughout the region, the leaders intend to keep the level of anxiety as low as possible, and the COVID-19 health crisis has not been used actively for the mobilisation of the society and the available resources.⁴² As governments tried to avoid introducing measures that would have increased the burden on the society, this approach relegated water issues to the background, and further delayed modernisation and structural reforms. State assistance provided to mitigate social tension in some cases may even hinder the sustainable development of water management in the short term (e.g. in the case of suspending water taxation fines in Uzbekistan).⁴³

³⁹ Stronski, Paul, ‘COVID-19 Exposes the Fragility of Central Asia’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 September, 2020.

⁴⁰ Mallinson, Kate, ‘COVID-19 Presents Fresh Challenges to a Struggling Central Asia’, *Chatham House Expert Comment*, 5 June, 2020.

⁴¹ Omelicheva, Mariya, and Lawrence P. Markowitz, ‘Central Asian Responses to COVID-19: Regime Legitimacy and [De]Securitisation of the Health Crisis’, *Ponars Eurasia*, 1 March, 2021.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Tulyakov, Eldor, ‘COVID-19: Actions Taken in Uzbekistan’, *The Foreign Policy Centre*, 13 July, 2020.

As for regional politics, the pandemic has severed the diplomatic lines of communication, and several aspects of everyday diplomacy have come to a halt for a while. Bilateral and multilateral meetings, be they symbolic visits, conferences of experts, high-level summits, or multilevel forums of different actors, were either cancelled or postponed. Possibly the most important in the line of these events was the third Consultative Meeting of regional leaders. The fact that it was not held during 2020 due to the pandemic (and the unstable political situation in Kyrgyzstan) has endangered the currently most influential regular political forum where issues of regional water management can be discussed.⁴⁴ The postponement has increased scepticism towards the Consultative Meeting,⁴⁵ and it has also meant a missed opportunity to discuss the reform of the Central Asian water management regime and negotiate a new regional agreement on water use.⁴⁶ Moreover, under the adverse circumstances of the pandemic, the renewal and reiteration of leaders' commitment to regional cooperation could have had significant added value both in terms of practical developments and trust-building both for the international and the domestic communities.⁴⁷ In terms of regional water management, the absence of coherent and continuous steps to maintain cooperation and commitment towards the establishment and institutionalisation of new mechanisms could endanger the success of the 'water thaw', jeopardizing its achievements so far.

As for the international community, the impact of the pandemic also has the potential to constrain cooperation with international donors. Although during the first wave, international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank, European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, and so on, quickly reacted to the adverse situation by providing emergency loans,⁴⁸ with the prolongation of the crisis they are likely to make their policies and the preconditions for providing loans and aid stricter. The great powers and other international actors, such as the International Organisation for Migration, the European Union (EU) and the World Health Organisation (WH), as well as state agencies such as Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) or the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have also decided to allocate funds for crisis management and recovery in Central Asia.⁴⁹ Due to the impact of a possible prolonged crisis, however, financial sources from donor organisations and countries are likely to become unstable, and increasing economic nationalism might also influence the funding and work of these actors in Central Asia, while other forms of loans and aid are likely to decline as well.⁵⁰ Regional water cooperation and the structural reforms necessary for the long-due changes in water management, in turn, would necessitate more international funding and investment after the pandemic.

Overall, in political terms, the pandemic has the potential to significantly constrain the political willingness and commitment towards regional water cooperation at multiple levels by reducing the political space and the tools available to act. Issues range from the efforts to maintain political stability in the republics, through the immediate effects of constraining

⁴⁴ Umarov, Akram, 'Third Central Asian Leaders' Meeting Postponed to 2021: Why It Matters', *The Diplomat*, 14 December, 2020.

⁴⁵ Tolipov, Farkhod, 'Central Asia's Integration Takes One Step Forward, One Step Back', *The Caucasus-Central Asia Analyst*, 26 January, 2021.

⁴⁶ Umarov 2020.

⁴⁷ Tolipov 2021.

⁴⁸ Gleason, and Baizakova 2020: 101–14; ESCAP 2021: 8.

⁴⁹ Assel, Satubaldina, 'EU Launches \$3.4 Million Program to Help Central Asia Fight COVID-19', *The Astana Times*, 21 July, 2020; Cohen, Ariel, 'COVID-19 Pandemic Puts Central Asia's Resilience to the Test', *Atlantic Council*, 4 May, 2020.

⁵⁰ Tran, Duc, 'In Central Asia, COVID-19 Response Demands Improved Regional Cooperation', *Asian Development Blog*, 4 November, 2020.

regional diplomatic communication, to the long-term impact of lacking sufficient financial support for the implementation of political decisions and policies, with various impacts in the domestic scene, on the bilateral level, in the region, and also at the level of international organisations and other global partners.

1.4. Summary

Summarizing the economic, social, and political consequences of COVID-19 in the water sector in Central Asia, it is clear that the multifaceted crisis situation described in this section is affecting the patterns and dynamics of regional water cooperation initiatives, and it will most certainly lead to changes related to them. The key question is whether the crisis is more likely to bring back and deepen the long-existing water tensions characteristic of the region between 2000 and 2016, or if Central Asian leaders will manage to tackle the newly arising challenges and related tensions within the recently established frames of cooperation. The following section focuses on the most important trends in broader regional cooperation that have the potential to predict how the situation in water relations will evolve.

II. Regional Cooperation in the Time of COVID-19

In spite of the gloomy tendencies produced by the consequences of COVID-19 analysed above, regional cooperation in Central Asia has not ceased during the pandemic. This section discusses four main areas where regional cooperation has worked against the disruptive impact of the pandemic and proved that political willingness and commitment to joint action serve the interests of every actor in the region. As the functioning of regional cooperation increases amity and provides a beneficial environment for the further development of regional water cooperation, the analysis of intra-regional assistance, diplomatic dialogue, and the incentives of regionalism in the forms of a committed Uzbek leadership and sustainable recovery initiatives during the pandemic contributes to the understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 on the ‘water thaw’.

II.1. Intra-Regional Assistance in the Spirit of Good Neighbourhood

The first area is bilateral intra-regional economic and humanitarian assistance, which was provided against the hit of COVID-19 and the evolving economic and social challenges. According to some experts, the relatively close collaboration against COVID-19 led by Uzbekistan has even strengthened Central Asian regional cooperation and mutual relations, and it has produced important diplomatic turning points.⁵¹

Kazakhstan offered economic and humanitarian assistance to Kyrgyzstan both in the first and in the second waves of the pandemic. Although Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had maintained reasonably friendly relations in the period before COVID-19, there were also tensions, e.g. leading to the refusal of a previous funding in 2017, which underlined the diplomatic importance of the present assistance.⁵² The quick help provided by Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan was also not entirely anticipated, as before Mirziyoyev, the two countries had had

⁵¹ Radjabov 2020.

⁵² Pannier, Bruce, ‘A New Era of Central Asian Cooperation? Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan Help a Neighbor in Need’, *RFE/RL*, 14 November, 2020b.

quite a tense relationship, including frequent border skirmishes. The Uzbek-Tajik relations had been even more adverse in the past, comparable to a ‘cold war,’⁵³ but this could not prevent Tashkent from sending assistance to Dushanbe several times during April and May 2020.⁵⁴ Uzbekistan was also no close friend of Kazakhstan before 2016, thus the current situation, when Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Mirziyoyev are voicing the need and importance of neighbourly help together,⁵⁵ marks a significant turn away from historic grievances – and this time not only in the form of the often criticised ‘flowery’ diplomatic talks⁵⁶ but also in action.

After the decades-long history of regional tensions, it was even more surprising that beside Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, inward-looking Tajikistan and Turkmenistan also signed a joint statement expressing concern about the ‘events happening in fraternal Kyrgyzstan,’ emphasizing that the ‘well-being of Kyrgyzstan is an important factor for regional security and sustainable development throughout Central Asia’.⁵⁷ It can be assumed that the presidents of the two leading powers of the region are coordinating their efforts in the field of regionalism, and they encourage turmoil-ridden Kyrgyzstan and reluctant Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to prioritise this level of cooperation as well.

Another example of unexpected assistance initiatives could be seen in the aftermath of the Sardoba dam catastrophe during the first wave of the pandemic. Even though Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were in a difficult situation, they decided to send help to Uzbekistan.⁵⁸ As for Turkmenistan, its involvement in regional diplomacy and pandemic-related cooperation is also more substantial than before. In August 2021, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow proposed the creation of a regional centre for virology and epidemiology, which was supported by all of his colleagues.⁵⁹

The recent tendencies in bilateral intra-regional assistance and the dialogue on the importance of regionalism are hailed by some experts as ‘a new era of Central Asian cooperation’,⁶⁰ the strengthening of which has the potential to accelerate the development of the regional water cooperation.

II.2. Maintaining Diplomatic Dialogue with Regional Focus

The second area is related to overcoming the barriers of diplomatic communication that have emerged due to the impact of the pandemic and the policy responses to constrain its spread. The impact of COVID-19 has indeed cut several important lines of bilateral, regional, and international communication. However, although borders were closed and several restrictions were imposed, the states of Central Asia did not have to face the crisis alone.

Even though the general indices of internet usage are rather low in the region, and the majority of the population does not have stable and constant internet access,⁶¹ digital diplomacy in Central Asia has gained significant impetus during the pandemic. With the acceleration of the application of advanced technologies, digital diplomacy could partly

⁵³ Rustami, Sukhrob, ‘Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as Possible Drivers of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia’, *CABAR.asia*, 22 October, 2020.

⁵⁴ ‘How COVID-19 in Tajikistan Is Affecting the Country’, *BORGEN*, 23 November, 2020; Cancarini, Davide, ‘Uzbekistan and COVID-19: A Communication Perspective’, *Central Asia Program*, 23 July, 2020.

⁵⁵ ‘Kazakhstan Provides Humanitarian Aid to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan’, *Euractiv.com*, July 2020.

⁵⁶ ‘Central Asia Leaders Confab but Stop Short of Binding Commitments’, *Eurasia.net*, 16 March, 2018.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Pannier 2020b.

⁵⁸ ‘Hydrodiplomacy in Rapid Action: Early Insights from the Sardoba Dam Disaster in Central Asia’, *Geneva Water Hub*, 9 September, 2020; Cancarini 2020.

⁵⁹ Pannier 2021.

⁶⁰ Pannier 2020b.

⁶¹ UNDP 2020: 19.

eliminate the adverse effects, and it has created an alternative for the broken lines of communication at the level of diplomacy. Akram Umarov has collected a long list of video conferences where Central Asian higher authorities could meet each other: leaders of the broadly understood region, representatives of great powers, and members of international organisations involved in regional issues during 2020, including events in the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Turkic Council, the C5+1 High-Level Dialogue between Central Asia and the United States, and further ministerial meetings with China, Japan, Russia, India, and the EU.⁶²

Online diplomacy has played a key role in maintaining water cooperation in the region during the pandemic. Online meetings and events were organised linking the local to the international level, and digital knowledge sharing opened up new opportunities to facilitate cooperation and create trust. Video conferences and webinars fostered the quick and efficient exchange of information in the case of international actors as well, from individual experts through donor organisations to great power partners.⁶³ The newly opened lines of communication are likely to stay after the pandemic, and the unexpected experience may serve as a starting point for further accelerating digital development.⁶⁴

Beside the internet, phone diplomacy also acquired an important position during the pandemic, and it has contributed to overcoming the physical obstacles of diplomatic cooperation. During the first wave of the pandemic, Central Asian presidents, especially regional leaders Mirziyoyev and Tokayev used this tool efficiently to discuss the emergency situation both with their colleagues in the region and with the great powers outside it.⁶⁵ Mirziyoyev alone conducted 17 calls with regional leaders between 16 March and early June 2020.⁶⁶

Furthermore, the leaders have shown willingness to discuss regional issues in person as well, which also involved negotiations on the further development of regional water cooperation. After a period of uncertainty, in August 2021, the five Central Asian presidents gathered personally in Turkmenistan to continue the series of high-level meetings that are valued as the most important turning point in regional relations. The third Consultative Meeting of regional leaders was organised between 5–6 August in Turkmenistan; in fact, this was the first of these summits when none of the incumbent presidents were absent. The greatest importance of the Consultative Meetings primarily lies in its mere existence – that is, in the recognition of the fact that the regional framework can provide a specific space to pursuing core interests, and in the demonstration of political commitment to participate in regional projects to tackle regional problems. On the other hand, the summits are organised without the presence of any great powers, signalling that the Central Asian leaders are committed to addressing the challenges of the region self-sufficiently, free from external influence.⁶⁷ The declaration of the Consultative Meeting devotes one of its 28 sections entirely to water-related cooperation and refers to the need of common coordination in the water sector in other sections as well.⁶⁸

⁶² Umarov, 2020.

⁶³ Gleason, Gregory, Pál Dunay, and Robert Baumann, ‘Tashkent COVID-19 Video Conference Calls for International Cooperation’, Video conference, George C. Marshall Center, May 2020; CCCAR 2021.

⁶⁴ Radjabov 2020.

⁶⁵ Putz, Catherine, ‘Tajik President Discusses Coronavirus Via Phone with Regional Leaders’, *The Diplomat*, 10 April, 2020; Pannier, Bruce ‘Mirziyoev Steps Up As COVID-19 Crisis Increases Contact Among Central Asian Leaders’, *RFE/RL*, 1 April, 2020c.

⁶⁶ Cancarini 2020.

⁶⁷ Tolipov 2021.

⁶⁸ Akorda.kz. ‘Joint Statement following the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia [Совместное Заявление по итогам Консультативной встречи Глав государств Центральной Азии]’, *Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, 6 August, 2021a.

II.3. The Main Engine of Regional Cooperation Keeps Working

The third area which may give reason for optimism is that the main engine of regional cooperation, Uzbekistan, did not lose its momentum in fostering common and coordinated action during the time of the pandemic. Shavkat Mirziyoyev seems to be dedicated to continuing his diplomatic efforts to strengthen regional cooperation and to secure the efficient and sustainable future of water management in Central Asia.

Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan has demonstrated high resilience in facing the economic impact of COVID-19.⁶⁹ When the pandemic broke out, the country had already taken important steps towards the long-overdue and long-awaited structural reforms in its economy, and it liberalised prices and privatised many state assets.⁷⁰ Its foreign relations were also more harmonious than at any time since its independence, both at the regional and at the international level, and it was actively working on the further improvement of its situation, especially on its integration into regional and global systems.⁷¹ Uzbekistan managed to change its decades-long isolated position within a remarkably short period of time, and the factors that supported its development also facilitated its resilience against the pandemic. In the meantime, Uzbekistan also made use of the fact that in spite of the several successful attempts to increase its embeddedness, it is not as deeply integrated in the global supply chains as, for example, its regional rival, Kazakhstan, and its economy is substantially more diversified and more stable than the smaller and poorer countries of the region.⁷²

In terms of politics, Mirziyoyev's government intended to tackle the impact of the pandemic to demonstrate its 'technical' and 'technocratic' orientation in contrast with the previous Karimov regime, in order to maintain its stability and support from the population.⁷³ It has also been willing and able to provide funding for those who are perceived to be in the most vulnerable situation,⁷⁴ and with the help of the international donors, it has been able to stabilise its economy.⁷⁵ Mirziyoyev has also been successful in coordinating regional efforts against the pandemic,⁷⁶ and he has taken the lion's share in providing intra-regional economic and humanitarian assistance.⁷⁷ His efficient communication strategy during the pandemic, both in terms of tackling domestic crises and keeping regional cooperation alive, has often been praised by experts.⁷⁸

Recently, in spite of the impact of the pandemic, Kazakhstan's president also seems to have joined forces with Mirziyoyev in furthering regional cooperation. The most important sign of Tokayev's engagement was that he made numerous proposals for institutionalizing regional cooperation on water resources at the Consultative Meeting. He argued for the establishment of a special working group for the discussion of water-related questions, which would involve the relevant vice ministers from the region, and apply a holistic approach. He also proposed the launch of the International Water and Energy Consortium in Central Asia, which would focus on coordinating the water-related interests of the states. He also suggested the revitalisation of two important institutions of the regional water management system: the

⁶⁹ Turkstra 2020; Fitch Solutions. 'Uzbekistan's Resilient Economy Well Placed For Recovery In 2021,' 3 February, 2021.

⁷⁰ Gleason, and Baizakova 2020: 111-112.

⁷¹ Weitz, Richard, 'Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity under New Leadership', Silk Road Paper, *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, 22 January, 2018.

⁷² Turkstra 2020.

⁷³ Omelicheva, and Markowitz 2021.

⁷⁴ Pannier 2020c.

⁷⁵ Cancarini 2020; Tulyakov 2020.

⁷⁶ Pannier 2020c.

⁷⁷ Cancarini 2020; Radjabov 2020.

⁷⁸ Cancarini 2020; Pannier 2020c.

International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, and the Syr-darya River Agreement of 1998.⁷⁹ Although Kazakhstan has had a tradition of supporting regional cooperation since its independence, Tokayev's increasing commitment towards water-related initiatives is a fairly new development. The parallel actions of Tokayev and Mirziyoyev to the furthering of regional cooperation on the use of water resources and on the development of the system of water management could efficiently balance the negative impact of the pandemic on the water sector and increase the working capacity of the engine of the Central Asian 'water thaw'.

II.4. Lively Discussions on the Green Agenda for Sustainable Recovery

The fourth area of regional cooperation, which is directly related to water resources, is the green agenda, which has prompted lively discussions during the pandemic. Although initiatives related to sustainable development have recently been on the rise in the region, the consequences of the pandemic have raised the idea of a 'green recovery', which is widely supported in the ranks of international organisations, great powers, and other international actors involved in the region.⁸⁰ The three-stage approach emphasizing 'relief, restructuring, and resilient recovery'⁸¹ not only appears as the holy trinity for organisations such as the World Bank, it also takes an important position on Central Asian leaders' agenda, and it has the potential to contribute to regional water cooperation. The agenda of the 'green recovery' from the impact of COVID-19 binds together and strengthens previous initiatives aimed to the development of regional water cooperation, and the comprehensive reform of the Central Asian water sector, thus it also provides a further impetus for the 'water thaw'.

The first important area that receives more emphasis in this framework is the fight against climate change. Climate change means a serious threat to Central Asian water resources and has the potential to increase water scarcity already in the short term. The declaration of the third Consultative Meeting also used the framework of the fight against climate change to describe the most important tasks related to water that demand regional cooperation. Putting great emphasis on mitigation and adaptation processes, the declaration draws a comprehensive picture of regional threats, from water pollution through glacier preservation to problems associated with hydropower plants.⁸²

Secondly, the broadly-propagated energy-related green initiatives also offer significant benefits to the water sector and the regional management of water use. The most important source of renewable energy in Central Asia is water,⁸³ and investments in the development of renewable energy infrastructure can contribute to raising the efficiency of the outdated water infrastructure through either extended maintenance or restructuring works, and they can also foster the construction of sustainable and environmentally-friendly new hydropower plants instead of large dam projects. Renewable energy sources could also present real solutions for the rural population, where problems with water and energy use and efficiency are the most adverse.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Wilder, Alejandro Sanchez, 'Kazakhstan Moves to Ease Water Conflict in Central Asia', *Geopolitical Monitor*, 3 September, 2021.

⁸⁰ CCCAR 2021.

⁸¹ Bjerde 2021.

⁸² Akorda.kz. 2021a.

⁸³ Shadrina, Elena, 'Renewable Energy in Central Asian Economies: Role in Reducing Regional Energy Insecurity', *ADB Working Paper Series*, August 2019, 13-20.

⁸⁴ Mehta, Kedar, Mathias Ehrenwirth, Christoph Trinkl, Wilfried Zörner, and Rick Greenough, 'The Energy Situation in Central Asia: A Comprehensive Energy Review Focusing on Rural Areas', *Energies* 14, no. 10 (May 13, 2021): 2805.

Initiatives for making agriculture more sustainable also offer many opportunities to develop water-related infrastructure, especially in terms of irrigation systems. Crop diversification and increased irrigation efficiency can alleviate the pressure on water channels, and further means of agricultural reform in general can increase the efficiency of the use of water and reduce negative externalities such as water pollution.⁸⁵ The inclusion of agricultural water users in water-related decisions may also increase the efficiency of water management, and local initiatives may have a positive impact on regional cooperation.

The implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals with their numerous water-related benchmarks is considered to be an important agenda throughout the region as well,⁸⁶ which also fosters the improvement of water management. Each Central Asian state already has its long-term plans concerning sustainable development, with targeted aims in the water sector.⁸⁷ Although both former and pandemic-related green programs have been focusing on broader topics than the regional cooperation on water issues, they are inseparably intertwined, and several elements of the plans designed to foster the sustainable development of the region coincide with the necessary preconditions for the thorough restructuring of the regional water management system.⁸⁸ While the pandemic may divert a huge amount of resources from sustainable development, and it has the potential to hinder the realisation of the ambitious plans concerning the sustainability of irrigation and hydropower systems, it also offers a direction for a green recovery, especially as international donors are more than willing to support sustainable initiatives in the region.

II.5. Summary

The four issue areas analysed above demonstrate that beside the arising challenges, the consequences of the pandemic also offer opportunities to accelerate the joint development and restructuring of the system of water management, and thus, to increase water cooperation in the region. The achievements of the ‘water thaw’ of the recent years apparently has not disappeared during the pandemic; the willingness of the political leaders to carry on with regional cooperation has been remarkably present throughout the toughest times of COVID-19, while green recovery initiatives have the potential to provide additional resources to implement decisions concerning the renewal of the systems of water use and regional water management in practice.

III. Two Thorny Inter-State Incidents Related to Water

The four issue areas in regional development discussed above, which are indirectly related to the future of regional water cooperation and the efficient and sustainable joint management of transboundary water resources, may indeed give reason for optimism. However, it also needs to be noted that Central Asia has suffered two of its most important incidents related to water management during the pandemic. The Sardoba dam catastrophe in 2020, and the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict in 2021 both could have meant a substantial breaking point in regional water

⁸⁵ ESCAP, 2021.

⁸⁶ ESCAP, ‘Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in North and Central Asia’, Background Paper, *SPECA Economic Forum*, 22-23 November, 2016; Mirziyoyev, Shavkat, ‘Speech by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly’, United Nations, 21 September, 2021.

⁸⁷ OECD 2020: 52-53.

⁸⁸ CCCAR 2021.

relations, especially in the tense atmosphere that evolved due to the economic, social, and political consequences of COVID-19.

III.1. The Sardoba Dam Catastrophe

On May 1, 2020, the dam of the three-year-old Sardoba reservoir, holding 922 million cubic meters of water, breached and flooded the surrounding areas, with catastrophic consequences. In Uzbekistan, approximately 70,000 people from 22 villages had to flee, about 60 people were injured and four were killed, and a state of emergency was declared. The effects of the catastrophe did not stop at the border and caused serious problems in neighbouring Kazakhstan as well. More than 31,000 people were evacuated, five villages and more than 7,600 hectares of crop lands were flooded.⁸⁹

The situation was extremely uncomfortable for Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who had overseen the building of the Sardoba dam as prime minister and is a committed supporter of building more reservoirs to improve the efficiency of the regional water management system.⁹⁰ The catastrophe and the events following it had the potential to further increase social tension in a pandemic-ridden era, when the population was already overstressed, while it could also jeopardise the achievements of Mirziyoyev's successful foreign policy activities. The consequences of the catastrophe threatened with additional bilateral political tension, and a possible return to the previously strained relations between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Tension between the two leading powers of the region evidently would have significantly weakened the 'water thaw', and it could have led to the deterioration of the recently developing regional relations. In the worst case, the Sardoba dam catastrophe could have erased four years of diplomatic efforts fostering cooperation on the water resources of the region.

In reality, the citizens of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan indeed reacted harshly to the situation on the social networks⁹¹ as well as in interviews conducted by press agencies. There have also been accusations of restricting free speech on the matter.⁹² In the meantime, lower-level Kazakh officers criticised Uzbek authorities for the limited information they provided about the dam breach, and the Kazakhs also demanded that the Uzbek government pay compensation for the consequences of the catastrophe.⁹³

Nevertheless, the decisive factor in determining the future of the situation was that the leaders of the two countries agreed on a peaceful, cooperative, and communication-oriented joint management of the crisis from the very first moment. Mirziyoyev and Tokayev swiftly organised a meeting where they discussed the possible areas of cooperation in tackling the consequences. The two prime ministers, Askar Mamin and Abdulla Aripov conducted negotiations and a joint visit to the catastrophe-ridden area, announcing a joint rehabilitation and reconstruction program. Public diplomacy also worked at a high level: the prime ministers symbolically put down the foundations of a new house together, photos of which were circulated in the media.⁹⁴ Kazakhstan's Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources Minister Magzum Mirzagaliyev also met Uzbekistan's Water Resources Minister Shavkat

⁸⁹ 'Dam Collapse in Uzbekistan. What Will Investigation Reveal?', *CABAR.asia*, 5 May, 2020.

⁹⁰ Simonov, Eugene, 'Uzbekistan Dam Collapse Was a Disaster Waiting to Happen', *The Third Pole*, 23 June, 2020.

⁹¹ Libert, Bo 'The Sardoba Dam Accident', *Swedish Aral Sea Society*, 13 May, 2020.

⁹² Pikulicka-Wilczewska, Agnieszka, 'It Wasn't Like This Even During Wartime', *Al-Jazeera*, 23 September, 2020.

⁹³ 'Dam Collapse in Uzbekistan. What Will Investigation Reveal?', *CABAR.asia*, 5 May, 2020.

⁹⁴ 'Hydrodiplomacy in Rapid Action: Early Insights from the Sardoba Dam Disaster in Central Asia', *Geneva Water Hub*, 9 September, 2020: 3-4.

Khamraev to talk about long-term policies to prevent similar accidents.⁹⁵ Uzbekistan committed to providing significant assistance to Kazakhstan, while, in the spirit of fraternal regional cooperation, COVID-19-ridden Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also sent their share of humanitarian aid to the affected regions.⁹⁶

The most important message of the catastrophe was voiced at the first meeting between Mirziyoyev and Tokayev, when Mirziyoyev stated that the Uzbek and the Kazakh people were committed ‘to overcoming any further difficulties that may arise in the spirit of friendship and good neighborliness’,⁹⁷ and Tokayev emphasised that they are committed to ‘ensure the fair and rational use of water resources, as well as to prevent threats and challenges of a transboundary nature on trust and transparency’.⁹⁸ The two leaders also mentioned that they intend to improve their joint system of water management and establish a permanent commission in order to cooperate more efficiently in terms of transboundary water resources. In July, the two countries also signed a roadmap on transboundary water cooperation.⁹⁹

Although the Uzbek investigation into the causes of the catastrophe has been far from comprehensive,¹⁰⁰ the ‘water thaw’ and the atmosphere of regional cooperation has survived the case of the Sardoba dam. Instead of inciting conflict, the case has seemingly given new impetus to joint water management initiatives and strengthened water cooperation both at the bilateral and the regional levels. According to the Geneva Water Hub, ‘the new cooperation discourse laid the groundwork for a “textbook case” of rapid, transboundary hydrodiplomacy’.¹⁰¹ The catastrophe, overall, has marked a significant potential breaking point in regional water relations, which was tackled successfully, while it has also drawn attention to the importance of joint water management during the time of COVID-19, when such questions were mostly relegated to the background by more urgent, pandemic-related issues.

III.2. The Kyrgyz-Tajik Conflict

One year after the Sardoba dam catastrophe, an even more straining event hit regional water cooperation in Central Asia, already ridden by the impact of the pandemic. On April 28, 2021, violent border clashes erupted between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which led to the most serious water-related conflict in the region since their independence. The conflict, which also involved the deployment of heavy weapons by the two armies, claimed the lives of at least 36 Kyrgyz and 19 Tajik citizens, mostly civilians, while more than 200 people got injured, and tens of thousands had to leave their homes.¹⁰² The direct reason for the clashes was the installation of surveillance cameras at the ‘Golovnoy’ water intake station at a reservoir on the River Isfara, which distributes water in an area where the Kyrgyz and Tajik borders are disputed.¹⁰³ However, the roots of this conflict go substantially deeper and can be traced back to two main issues: the disputed borders between the two countries, and the low-functioning system of water management, accompanied by a lack of efficient political coordination.

⁹⁵ ‘Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan to Jointly Examine Collapsed Dam Wall’, *New Europe Online*, 15 May, 2020.

⁹⁶ Geneva Water Hub 2020: 4-5.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Shayahmetova, Zhanna, ‘Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan Unitedly Deal with Flood Consequences After Major Dam Collapse In Region’, *The Astana Times*, 11 May, 2020: 10.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*: 11.

⁹⁹ Geneva Water Hub 2020: 5.

¹⁰⁰ Putz 2020.

¹⁰¹ Geneva Water Hub 2020: 4.

¹⁰² Arynova, Aigoul and Susanne Schmeier, ‘Conflicts over Water and Water Infrastructure at the Tajik-Kyrgyz Border: A Looming Threat for Central Asia?’, *IHE Delft*, 2021: 2.

¹⁰³ ‘What Drove the Worst Kyrgyz-Tajik Conflict in Years?’, *The Third Pole*, 28 May, 2021.

The conflict has meant the greatest challenge for the emerging ‘water thaw’ and regional cooperation in Central Asia so far, and the COVID-19-related economic and social grievances have made the likelihood of a full-fledged armed conflict even higher. However, instead of the ‘water war’ that was expected in some news outlets,¹⁰⁴ the events took a cooperative turn, when high-level politics became involved. The two countries agreed to a ceasefire relatively quickly, on May 1, deciding to establish a working group to settle the issue. The presidents of the two countries, Emomali Rahmon and Sadyr Japarov held several negotiations in a peaceful spirit, where they discussed long-term solutions,¹⁰⁵ while Foreign Ministers Sirojaddin Muhridin and Ruslan Kazakbayev, and National Security Chairmen Saimumin Yatimov and Kamchybek Tashiev also stepped up for the peaceful, negotiation-based resolution of the situation from the beginning.¹⁰⁶

At the end of June, Japarov arrived to Dushanbe for an official visit, accompanied by several high-ranking ministers and officers. Rahmon and Japarov signed a joint statement in which they ‘realising their high responsibility for preserving the bonds of friendship and good-neighbourliness, confirmed their determination to progressively develop relations between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan’,¹⁰⁷ and committed themselves to a constructive dialogue based on peaceful diplomatic means. Although the documents they signed did not contain references to the clashes or to the development of water cooperation per se, the friendly atmosphere and the declarations signify that the leaders of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are (similarly to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) committed to solving their water-related conflicts in the spirit of the ‘water thaw’, and they are ready to mitigate tensions in order to avoid an escalation that may bring local and regional destabilisation, as well as a loss of trust among the peoples of the region. The presidents of the two leading powers of the region, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, also expressed their support for a peaceful settlement and drew attention to the importance of regional cooperation and stability.¹⁰⁸

Although the parties primarily understood the clashes as a border delimitation conflict,¹⁰⁹ the water component in the tensions and the relationship with the current inefficient system of water management cannot be ignored. It needs to be highlighted that in this case we cannot talk about ‘a textbook case’ of diplomacy, let alone the reassuring settlement of the related water issues or border delimitation questions.¹¹⁰ However, the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict also fits in the broader framework of an increasingly cooperative Central Asian atmosphere, in spite of the presence of several very sensitive issue areas, which had been a constant source of tensions since independence. Moreover, the importance of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict, similarly to that of the case of the Sardoba dam, does not only lie in the initiation of the peaceful settlement of a very strained and escalation-prone situation, but also in the fact that it has drawn attention to the shortcomings of the current water management system in Central Asia during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, redirecting and renewing

¹⁰⁴ Ismayilov, Sadraddin, ‘Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Conflict: A Sign of Water War’, *Report News Agency*, 20 April, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ President.tj, ‘Telephone Conversation of the President of Tajikistan with the President of Kyrgyzstan’, *The official website of the Tajik President*, 30 April, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Risbekkizi, Perizat, ‘What Is Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Conflicts Teaching About: Seeking Cooperation in Central Asia’, *Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Studies*, 10 May, 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in ‘Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan Sign Four Agreements, but No Border Document among Them’, *Tajikistan Newslines*, 2 July, 2021: 9.

¹⁰⁸ Akorda.kz 2021b; Kudryavtseva, Tatyana, ‘Sadyr Japarov and Shavkat Mirziyoyev Discuss Border Conflict’, *24.kg*, 30 April, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Avazbekov, Nadyrbek, ‘Kyrgyz-Tajik Border Disputes: Reasons and Ways of Solution’, *CABAR.asia*, 18 March, 2021.

¹¹⁰ Costa Buranelli 2021b.

attention to the sorely needed reform and development of the water sector both in technical and political terms – which can only be reached through regional cooperation.

III.3. Summary

Although the two examined cases of the Sardoba dam catastrophe in 2020, and the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict in 2021 both had the potential to reverse the positive trends in regional water cooperation and push Central Asia back to the nationalist discourses and unilateral approaches of water management, in reality the two situations evolved differently. In spite of the adverse impact of the pandemic which hit the water sector and the general stability of the region, the two cases were tackled in the spirit of the recently evolving ‘water thaw’ and regional cooperation. The highest-level political reaction on the two thorny issues demonstrated Central Asian leaders’ commitment to solving the emerging challenges together, in a peaceful and cooperative manner, regarding regional stability and cooperation as a principal common interest.

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the dynamics of regional water relations in Central Asia, in order to examine whether the pandemic could challenge the ‘water thaw’. The first part of the research, focusing on the potential disruptive and adverse effects mediated by the economic, social, and political intervening variables between the impact of the pandemic and the dynamics of water cooperation seemed to indicate that COVID-19 has a negative influence on the ‘water thaw’. The analysis showed that the present tendencies has mostly relegated regional water cooperation to the background, and the constraints induced by the pandemic significantly limit the abilities of Central Asian states to continue their initiatives to modernise and restructure the system of regional water management.

In spite of the fact that the emerging ‘water thaw’ was apparently halted by COVID-19 in March 2020, the second and third part of the research demonstrated that the positive tendencies of regional cooperation prevailed during the pandemic, and the atmosphere of amity providing a beneficial environment for the ‘water thaw’ was maintained. The fight against COVID-19 has shown important examples of regional cooperation, directly or indirectly concerning the water sector. A common political will to tackle the arising problems in the region in the framework of a self-sufficient Central Asian cooperation (be it bilateral or multilateral) has also been demonstrated. The research also shows that the inevitable and urgent recovery process in the aftermath of the pandemic offers new windows of opportunity to put regional water cooperation back on track with a new momentum, and to create an economically and financially sustainable system of regional water management, solving the problems in the water sector that had been accumulated over a long period of time.

Although regional water issues were relegated to the background by the pandemic, crisis situations related to transboundary waters showed the durability of the cooperative attitude as the joint desecuritisation and politicisation of these events took place. In 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic, the region saw one of its biggest technological catastrophes with the dam collapse at Sardoba, which increased tension in the Uzbek-Kazakh relations. In 2021, increasing tensions led to the most significant interstate clash in the region since its independence, with the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict. In spite of these significant strains on

state relations during the pandemic, the spirit of regional cooperation has not evaporated – on the contrary, state leaders have reacted to these crises in a way that strengthened their commitment to peaceful diplomatic solutions, with telling references to regional stability and cooperation as a common interest. Based on these experiences, it can even be claimed that the ‘water thaw’ has helped cushion the impact of COVID-19, as it has developed attitudes and mechanisms of water cooperation that were strong enough to hold throughout the most difficult times of the pandemic, when access to water was even more of key importance than before.

Overall, it can be concluded that although the impact of COVID-19 indeed has the potential to challenge the achievements of the ‘water thaw’ to an extent, there are numerous other factors in play. The impact of COVID-19 also acts as a catalyst by offering opportunities to demonstrate the commitment of the Central Asian republics to regional cooperation. It also assigns special urgency to the implementation of long-overdue reforms in terms of joint transboundary water management, to the benefit of each stakeholder. The careful and thorough planning of recovery processes can ensure the intertwined tackling of the multiple post-pandemic crises and developing the Central Asian water sector in the framework of an efficient regional cooperation. Political willingness will be decisive in channelling recovery initiatives towards this direction under the difficult economic, social, and political circumstances. Nevertheless, as the above analysis has shown, there is reason for optimism, as the leaders of Central Asia seem to remain committed to the spirit of the ‘water thaw’, despite the numerous challenges posed by the pandemic and its consequences.

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