

Typology of Border Incidents in Central Asia and Regional Approach to Their Settlement

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Throughout independence period (since 1991 after the collapse of the former Soviet Union) Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – have faced a number of border incidents between each other. In such incidents there were small skirmishes of border guards, local border area residents from two neighboring countries who just threw stones towards each other claiming the belonging of some water reservoirs, infrastructural installation or pastures.

In order to understand and explain the origin and character of those border incidents in Central Asia, it is important to conceptually classify them. In my opinion, the type of conflicts which we are considering can be defined as ‘low intensity conflicts’. Three features characterize such low intensity conflicts, namely: 1) duration is short – a few days; 2) geographical scope is small and limited to only those villages or local communities where the incident broke out; 3) the number of victims is also small – several dozens of hundreds. Therefore, all the conflict situations we are talking about have been coped with very quickly.

Moreover, they neither were caused by nor produced antagonism between states and their peoples. Surprisingly, border incidents occurred in explicit and implicit friendly and integrationist political atmosphere in the region. All Central Asian leaders, officials and ordinary people call each other brother nations. One of the first official agreements that they adopted after gaining independence was on recognition of the administrative border lines between former Soviet republics as official borders of independent states. Thereby, they made it clear that they have no territorial claims toward each other.

In this sense, they are contrasting with many other border clashes and territorial claims which happen between states in other regions of the world, for example: Palestine-Israel antagonism and wars over lands and cities, Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir, or Armenia-Azerbaijan war over Nagorno-Karabakh, and others. From this perspective, I think, sporadic skirmishes between local communities and border guards of Central Asian countries do not reflect the intentional and purposeful policy of the central authorities of these states but rather are provoked



by some irresponsible local people, criminal groups or reasons related to everyday livelihood of local residents. We cannot exclude also the possible role of the geopolitical factor and the old principle of 'divide and rule'.

Anyhow, the experience of coping with sporadic border incidents by Central Asian states demonstrates that peaceful and win-win solutions are possible. Take, for instance, most recent 3 cases: First, the dam at the "Sardoba" water reservoir, which is located in Syrdarya province of Uzbekistan bordering Southern Kazakhstan provinces, was destroyed during the strong gale on 1 May 2020 and water flow caused flood in the territories of both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This tragedy claimed victims and created great economic damage to both countries. 4 people died, 1 disappeared, many houses were completely destroyed. Those days the rumors were spread from some governmental agencies of Kazakhstan that this state would send the note to Uzbekistan. However, the note wasn't sent. On the contrary, two states resolved this problem in a peaceful and friendly way.

Second, in the border area "Sokh" between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan a small clash occurred between local Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities over the small spring "Chashma". Sokh is an exclave in the territory of Kyrgyzstan belonging to Uzbekistan. 80 km long road connecting Sokh with the Uzbekistan's mainland is controlled by the Kyrgyz side – the fact that often becomes the reason for multiple resentments of Sokh residents. "Sokh" event was not simply a border issue but also revealed the phenomenon of enclaves which was left as a legacy of early XX-th century artificial partition of Central Asia into the five Soviet republics. This time, unprecedented communication of Uzbek authorities with the local population took place in Sokh when the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan Abdulla Aripov visited this district and promised the local residents to resolve the problem together with Kyrgyz side.¹

Soon after, on April 1, 2021, the long-awaited road connecting the Uzbek Sokh enclave on Kyrgyzstan's territory with Uzbekistan's mainland was reopened, allowing free movement of cars and pedestrians. This became possible after Kyrgyzstan's newly elected President Sadyr Japarov's visit to Uzbekistan in March, 2021, during which the two states announced that no border problems remain between them. The Republic of Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic demonstrated

¹Tolipov, F. "Border Problems in Central Asia: Dividing Incidents, Uniting Solution", in July 16, 2020, the *CACI Analyst*, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13632-border-problems-in-central-asia-dividing-incidents-uniting-solution.html>

and confirmed their relationship as strategic partners and provided a new example of Central Asian integration.²

It has to be noted that, since 2018, a special mechanism of communication is working between the Central Asian countries – Consultative Meetings of Presidents. This mechanism indicates common intention of the five ‘stans’ to maintain the regional format of cooperation directed to the integration of the entire region. Consultative Meetings as such are obviously incompatible with any border incident in the region. Moreover, Central Asian states signed agreements on strategic partnership with each other and in 1998 they signed a unique document – “Treaty on Eternal Friendship”.

As a conclusion, following three principles and recommendations can be made regarding how border problems should be addressed.

First, the principle of region-building: this is an approach to any conflict situations between Central Asian countries stemming from integration vision of the region. It means that all five countries use regional format and mutual help to cope with any conflicts.

Second, the principle of inclusive de-escalation: this means that in case of conflicts and incidents local residents of the border area, activists, elders, local district governors, youth, NGOs from both sides of the border should meet and communicate, in order to restore peace and mutual trust.

Third, the principle of ‘out-of-box thinking’: the overall approach to the issue of delimitation of the border should be innovative and perspective, based not on the momentary interests and nationalist sentiments but on clear strategic program of the development of countries and a region as a whole. This approach differs from ‘in-box thinking’ which utilizes such concepts as sovereignty and nationalism and stipulates uncompromising strategy on border issues.

²Tolipov, F. “The Sokh Enclave: A Breakthrough in Central Asian Cooperation”, April 21, 2021, the CACI Analyst, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13669-the-sokh-enclave-a-breakthrough-in-central-asian-cooperation.html>

Some of the policy recommendations that can be considered by relevant authorities:

- Consultative Meeting of presidents should be convened every time when a conflict situation appears;
- A pact on peace and regional community of peoples of Central Asia should be adopted, which could become a follow up of the Treaty on Eternal Friendship and a number of Joint Statements adopted in previous summits.
- To adopt a special five-lateral agreement for 5 years on moratorium on delimitation and demarcation of the border in disputable districts and work out a package of measures on joint usage of objects / infrastructure located on such disputable territories. In the same agreement, the ban should be foreseen on use by the military of firearms in case of outbreak of conflict.
- To work out a model of trans-boundary clusters (districts) in disputable territories for supporting cross-border trade, entrepreneurship, movement of the local residents and creation of new jobs in these clusters. A special Regional Fund can be created for promotion of trans-border cooperation and attracting investments and donor organizations for realization of different projects in such places.
- To create a special regional monitoring mechanism (center, group) from representatives of expert community and state agencies (either on the bilateral level between states or on the regional level) for constant monitoring of the situation in the disputable zones of the border area and for working out suggestions on gradual improvement trans-border communications.
- To support and stimulate new initiatives from local population (always local problems have been dealt with by the government for and on behalf of but not with the local population), for instance, concerts, sport competitions, tourism, trade-fairs, TV broadcasting etc.

Finally, the visit of Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov to Tashkent in March, 2021 deserves mentioning. During that visit strategically important decisions on border delimitation were adopted which imply a whole package of measures including joint management of objects as well as exchange of lands. These decisions have created a strong mechanism and a model for future decisions of this kind. So if there is a political will, the solution can always be found.