

WATER CONFLICT IN CENTRAL ASIA: IMPACTS ON INTER-STATE RELATIONS

Abstract

Water is the central resource involved in one of the world's greatest human-induced ecological disaster: The desiccation of Aral Sea in Central Asia had brought enormous water related issue leading to the conflict among Central Asian countries. This paper analyses the root causes & impacts of the water crisis issue over Central Asian Inter-State relations and argues that tensions over water have "spilled -over" in Central Asia, creating an uneasy political climate and that has slowed down co-operation. The Paper significantly highlights co-operation in among Central Asian states and impact of water crisis on their inter-state relations. A case study is taken to show how water crisis made *compel* Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to securitize this issue and how their interest and relations impacted. This paper is crucial to understand the present condition of water crisis and how it is being dealt in the region.

Keywords: Conflict, co-operation, Water management, Water Crisis, Aral Sea, Amu and Syr River Basin

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I. INTRODUCTION

Water is one of major resources among all the resources and in absence of water availability life on this planet is unimaginable. The earth as a planet is known for living of creature and it is possible because of existence of water on earth. An old dictum “Water is life” is of course proved true. The importance of water can be understood through the practices as it is being worshiped by many people through their respective religious norms. There is a parallel relation between water and living creature and if such equation disturbs that will have negative impact on all the living creatures. In reality such fluctuation happened by human beings and led to crisis of natural resources. Water crisis is one of consequences of such globalization, Industrialization and mismanagement of several developmental programs. It is actually Industrialization, increasing economic activities and rising population that are making water crisis more worst. As the world is getting globalised none of the issue is limited to any specific area so, water crisis is now seen as a global concern in which human beings have major role. It is human beings who have carelessly overused natural resources for their convenience. The issue of water crisis is one of topic which is being debated throughout the world by several scholars, is needed to address as it is affecting a lot to the whole life-system.

The Soviet Union treated five Central Asian states as one single economic area and the plan was to produce as much as crops mainly cotton and water management was planned accordingly. Water resource of Central Asian republics was managed from Moscow at the regional level and was based on barter system creating mutual dependence. The hydropower plants (HPP) in the upstreams provided water to the downstream states’ agricultural industry which in turn delivered food and other energy resources, particularly gas to the upstream states accordingly (Kocak 2015). After the disintegration of Soviet Union administrative borders reverted to national borders and what has previously been an internal issue turned into a cause of war on a regional and international scale (Hodgson 2010).

Energy resources; especially water, were in great abundance and there was no dearth of water in Central Asia, and the region has been known for its water enrichment. With the start of 21st century situations have changed and Central Asia has turned into a dry place. Water crisis was recognized in 1960s in Central Asia when economic policies of USSR and Cotton production were started affected due to slow stream of water (White 2013). The word water crisis (scarcity) is defined as “Unavailability or less-availability of water resource in good quantity to meet basic need of human beings and sustaining economy” (White 2012). Water was major natural resources for soviet economy as was used for cotton production and Industrial activities. During Soviet period there was a strong centralized water management policy in which quota system were implemented for water sharing among all five Central Asian States. Soviet government built several dams and water reservoir around Amu and Syr river basin avoiding environmental concern (Roberts 2022). All these activities led creation of environmental problem and Water crisis.

The Amu darya and Syr darya (most significant water source for Aral Sea Basin) - the major trans-boundary rivers- are at the center of the dispute. The Amu darya – the biggest river in the region in terms of water availability- is formed by Panj river in Afghanistan and Vakhsh river in Afghanistan and flows Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan before falling into Aral Sea. The Syr darya- the longest river in the region in terms of length-

emerges from Tien Shan Mountains in Turkmenistan and flows towards Tajikistan and Uzbekistan before merging into Aral Sea.

Both Amu and Syr river basin is known as a life of Central Asian States that merges into Aral Sea. Because of mis-management and overuse of water Aral Sea did not get sufficient amount of water to run naturally. Situations became complicated in post-independence era when centralized water management of USSR was removed and Central Asian States started looking water resources with national security angle. The problem of increasing demand and declining supplies have been compounded by the failure the regions nations' to work together. Rising nationalism and competition among five Central Asian States meant they have failed to come up with a viable regional approach to replace the soviet system of water management. Analysis of agreement in Central Asia focusing on cooperation in large, basin-wide agreements is also widely available.

This paper focuses on mainly Amu and Syr river basin as a factor which impacts a lot in inter-state relations in Central Asia. Both river basins are important in this sense that it covers almost five Central Asian states and are major source of irrigation and other economic activities. Amu river emerges from Pamir plateau (Under Tajikistan) passes through Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan then merges into Aral Sea, while Syr river basin emerges from Kyrgyzstan and merges into Aral Sea by crossing Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This paper try to look how trans-boundary rivers provides space for co-operation and conflict in doing so only Amu and Syr river basin is taken for work. Some suggestions are given in conclusion on inter-state relations among Central Asian states.

II. IMPACTS ON CENTRAL ASIAN INTER- STATES RELATIONS

Existing water crisis has impacted – both negative and positive way- to a great level on Central Asian Countries. The issue should have taken as “Common Tragedy” by Central Asian States but besides it they viewed it by keeping national interest adding with national security. Since independence the region witnessed a clear “Trust deficit” among Central Asian states to each other and it portrayed the way countries in the region are getting impacted by the water crisis. Relation between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan slowed down when Kazakhstan blamed Kyrgyzstan for blocking water building large reservoir along Syr river basin. The same happen with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, even Uzbek president directly threatened Kyrgyzstan if it diverted water of Syr river. Till 2000 such several incident happen which created trust deficit among. Although in such situation in which water crisis is critical countries must respect of each others' problem besides looking it with security angle.

Another visible impact is the “escalation of conflict” among Central Asian states over water crisis. Uzbekistan's economy is much depended on cotton production that requires much water. In post -1991 around 30-40% Uzbek land did not receive sufficient amount of water that let to suffer its economy (Severskiy 2004). On several occasion conflict escalated in such a bad level in which down-stream countries claim that they are compel to escalate conflict as they are becoming victim. According to Almaty agreement, 1991 every country has to get suffice water based on quota but because of mis-management problem the issue remains exist. Situations seemed not ideal in Central Asia when it came to solving and managing water issue. Such prospect of confrontation made region unstable for cooperation in several areas mainly in trade and water.

Migration is another significant consequence of water crisis which in turn damaged to a large extent of the inter-state relations of Central Asian States. It is well known fact that Central Asian economy hit by water crisis badly that produced unemployment. As a consequence of unemployment the trend of migration has significantly increased. Migration in some extent improved relation among states as people movement from one to other country influenced by others' culture and came closer to other culture. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan produced more migration and mostly go to Russia. However migration to Kazakhstan from other Central Asian states escalated as Kazakhstan economy witnessed growth. Kazakhstan has in good number of oil and gas industry which needs human resources so in this sense Kazakhstan is benefited from cheap labor. When illegal migration came into picture the problem came into light of concerning countries. Countries which absorbed migrants claimed that illegal migrants are involved in crime, drug-trafficking and other violence and that it is those countries' responsibility which is producing illegal migrants.

Other consequence of water crisis is the emergence of ultra-nationalism and heterogeneity which were seen as a serious threat for Central Asian states' inter-state relation. Ultra-nationalism in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was clearly visible which emphasized on their national interest even at the cost of other countries' interest. Animosity between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan over Water issue was being supported by ultra-nationalist leaders which took such issue as a political tool. Both up-stream countries Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also faced the problem of emerging ultra-nationalism. Emerging ultra-nationalism and heterogeneity among Central Asian republics led to malfunction of existing water management policies which were well functioning since the Soviet era. Such challenges made countries in Central Asia believe that they are victim of water crisis without taking into consideration of other neighbouring countries.

Rising economic inter-dependence is another significant consequence of water crisis. In a globalised world inter-dependence is a general phenomena and even it is necessary to do business. There are two types of countries in Central Asia, one which has oil, gas and other resources except water (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan & Turkmenistan), another is which has only water and forest (Tajikistan & Kyrgyzstan). To meet their need it is necessary to be dependent to each other countries. Up-stream countries are in need of oil & gas so dependent on down-stream countries while down-stream countries are dependent on up-stream countries for water resources. It means both types of states are economically interdependent. As an impact of environmental degradation water stream is diminishing and if it continue then mutual inter-dependence may be stopped in future and that will led to economic chaos in Central Asia. Major regional organizations such as – SCO and CIS provide an ideal platform to deal their concerns.

In general, the study found mostly negative impacts of water crisis on Central Asian Relation. However it also has some undeniable positive impacts which provided good platform to Central Asian states to come closer and understand each other. In fact in Central Asia water crisis is a common problem and countries impacted by the water crisis made efforts to deal with the issue by coming together. On 12th October 1991 water management agreement among Central Asian states signed and formalized on February 1992 with the signing of the Almaty agreement. Inter-state Coordinating Watch Commission (ICWC) was also established to facilitate the implementation of quota of water distribution (Zhupankhan 2017). Both above management body are example of efforts of states to come close and sit on same

table to discuss on a particular issue. Cooperation among states is important in Central Asia and without it we can't expect good hope. It is the crucial mechanism which can help in dealing with common tragedy like issues.

By highlighting the impact of water crisis on Central Asian Inter-state relations I have used analytical view with sharp suggestion. It is clear from above that water crisis in Central Asia has reached at its peak and creating many challenges in this region. A region like Central Asia which religiously, culturally, ethnically & linguistically diverse facing water crisis which is most valuable for every creatures must be helped by external power on humanitarian ground. Relations among Central Asia states may be negatively impacted by compulsion as all states need water but in reality there is not suffice water. It has link with environmental degradation which is a global problem and every single human being has the responsibility to deal such dangerous issue.

III.A CASE STUDY OF UZBEKISTAN & TURKMENISTAN

This case study is taken as an example to understand what are the challenges that water sharing countries are facing over water crisis and how are these challenges affecting their relations. Some 18 million people in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan live off the water of Amu Darya. These two nations along with other Central Asian countries signed an agreement in 1996 to divide this equally (Dinar 2005). Officially both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan opine that they are happy with implementation. However Uzbek politicians and water experts complain that Turkmenistan takes too much. Uzbek experts maintain that it is unfair to divide the water of Amu Darya equally since 14 million people live in their country compared to 4 million people in Turkmenistan. Besides Uzbekistan has more land and water has to be transported over longer distance. In their view demography, total land to irrigate as well as water losses should be taken into account when fixing water quotas.

Since their independence relation between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan has been far from friendly and cordial. Various factors including water conflict contributed to this situation. Open conflict between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan almost erupted in the past over water issue but around murky politics only. With the start of 21st century dispute between both got intensify. In November 2002 Turkmenistan government reported an unsuccessful assassination attempt on then president Niyazov and accused Uzbekistan's ambassador in Ashgabat of assisting with a coup plot (Peimani 2003). Relations between two countries remained frozen until 2004 when Niyazov and Karimov met and signed an agreement on rising global energy prices. Turkmenistan has built an artificial lake named as "The Age Golden Lake" in Karakum desert drained by Karakum canal. Karakum Canal absorbs around one-fourth of water which were earlier used to fell into Aral Sea (Tukhbatullin 2020). As a result down-stream country like Uzbekistan started getting less water and blamed Turkmenistan for this water crisis in Uzbekistan. Both countries saw water in the region through national security view and it is securitization of water resources which is making problem more completed. The Karakum Canal- the main water flow from the Amu Darya to irrigated Turkmen lands-carries twice as much water as much in Soviet time but poorly maintained, gradually silting up and becoming increasingly insufficient in terms of water loss and delivery. Rising ultra-nationalism in both countries have linked this issue with national security and by doing so they are making issue more complicated and it also gives a bad message to opposite counter. In 2001-2 around 2 Uzbek people were killed leaving

around 20 wounded when they tried to interfere in water basin in North Turkmenistan (Srivastava 2004). Relations were tensed at that time and the same period rumor of coup in Turkmenistan came, making relations between countries worst. There are several platforms for dealing such issues but it is lack of political willingness and heterogeneity which makes stone before solution. SCO and other organization can be fruitful in solving such issues. This case study simply makes an argument that water crisis in Central Asia has reached at such level that it has started impacting badly not only member states but others too. Obviously water crisis has negatively impacted relations of Central Asian states with little positive impact.

IV. CONCLUSION

It has been clear that Water crisis has become not only regional but global issue which is affecting poorly the whole planate. Water crisis is not something which has new emergence, it is actually a part of chain named environmental problem and without dealing with environment we would not be able to address this issue. In the context of Central Asia, it has been centre of water reservoir and was once enriched but it is human being through Industrialization and other mis-management activities made condition worst. Its impact on inter-state relation is natural as they need water for their economy and when demands are more and less supply situations comes situations led to chaos.

Central Asia experienced both positive and negative in nature of impact of water crisis which creates instability in the region and in modern time this is being supported by ultra-nationalist and religious traditionalist which would never be in favor of any country. There are several institutions, organizations and civil societies are in that region which must take it as a serious issue try to deal it. On moral every human being must initiate some steps to curb such issues as without participatory nature of activities it is not possible to deal with such issue.

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