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## Water Politics in Central Asian Countries: Political Aspects

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**Abstract.** The problem of politicization of water relations remains acute for the countries of Central Asia. Despite efforts, the growing deficit of water resources provokes increased attention to the problem by the countries of the region and extra-regional states. The water policy of the Central Asian countries began to form after the collapse of the USSR, when the geopolitical situation changed dramatically. The Central Asian states regarded independence as an opportunity to strengthen their positions in the region, primarily through the implementation of an independent and nationally oriented water policy. The foreign policy course in the field of hydropower was formed under the influence of domestic political processes that developed at the time of the collapse of the USSR. Despite the growing problems in the water sector, the countries of the region continued to pursue a course that ignored the interests of neighboring states and did not imply the development of multilateral cooperation in the water sector. Most of the issues related to the use of transboundary watercourses were under powerful pressure from political factors. Geopolitical rivalry between the Central Asian states had an effect. As a result of national policies that were only interested in increasing their power in the region and getting geo-economic benefits, promising projects for hydraulic structures were looked at. Only in recent years, due to internal political changes and the growing shortage of water resources, the Central Asian countries began to change their positions, advocating for the development of dialogue. Using the method of comparative and systemic analysis, the influence of political factors on the water sector of the Central Asian countries was revealed. The article concludes that despite the softening of the rhetoric by the Central Asian countries when discussing problems related to the use of transboundary watercourse resources and the expansion of bilateral and multilateral cooperation, political aspects will continue to influence the water policy of the Central Asian countries.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, water sector, political aspects, hydraulic structures, water policy

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## Политические аспекты водного курса стран Центральной Азии

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**Аннотация.** Проблема политизации водных отношений по-прежнему остро стоит для стран Центральной Азии. Несмотря на усилия, рост дефицита водных ресурсов провоцирует повышенное внимание к проблеме стран региона и внерегиональных государств. Водная политика стран Центральной Азии стала формироваться после распада СССР, когда кардинально изменилась геополитическая ситуация. Получение независимости центральноазиатские государства расценили в качестве возможности упрочить свои позиции в регионе, прежде всего, за счет проведения самостоятельной и национально ориентированной водной политики. Внешнеполитический курс в сфере гидроэнергетики формировался под влиянием внутривнутриполитических процессов, которые получили развитие на момент распада СССР. Несмотря на нарастание проблем в водной сфере, страны региона продолжали проводить курс, который игнорировал интересы соседних государств и не предполагал развитие многостороннего сотрудничества в водной сфере. Большая часть вопросов, касающихся использования ресурсов трансграничных водотоков, находилась под мощным прессингом политических факторов. Сказывалось геополитическое соперничество между центральноазиатскими государствами. Перспективные проекты гидротехнических сооружений рассматривались в контексте исключительно национальной политики, направленной на укрепление своего влияния в регионе и получение геоэкономических преимуществ. Лишь в последние годы, в связи с внутривнутриполитическими изменениями и нарастанием дефицита водных ресурсов, страны Центральной Азии стали менять свои позиции, выступая за развитие диалога. Используя метод сравнительного и системного анализа, выявлено влияние политических факторов на водную сферу стран Центральной Азии. Автором сделан вывод, что, несмотря на смягчение центральноазиатскими странами риторики при обсуждении проблем, связанных с использованием ресурсов трансграничных водотоков, и расширением двустороннего и многостороннего взаимодействия, политические аспекты по-прежнему будут влиять на водный курс стран Центральной Азии.

**Ключевые слова:** Центральная Азия, водная сфера, политические аспекты, гидротехнические сооружения, водная политика

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## Introduction

The urgency of the problem is determined by the continuing conflict potential, which has not diminished between the Central Asian states on the issue of using the water resources of transboundary rivers of Central Asia. Despite the improvement of interstate relations between the countries of the region, many issues are still acute. First of all, this concerns the construction and subsequent use of hydraulic structures. Formally, they should contribute to the solution of water problems. However, in practice, in the conditions of increasing deficit, they are capable of intensifying interstate contradictions.

In recent years, the problem of water resources has been the focus of attention of Russian and foreign researchers. The author of the article has repeatedly addressed issues related to the use and distribution of water resources in the countries of Central Asia. In the last two decades, the following works have been published: “The fight for water” [Zhiltsov, Zonn 2008], “Policy of the Central Asian countries in the field of use of water resources of transboundary rivers” [Zhiltsov, Bimenova 2015], “The Role of Water Resources in Central Asia” [Zhiltsov, Zonn 2019], “The Problem of water scarcity in Central Asia: The factor of Afghanistan” [Zhiltsov 2023]. In addition, in 2018, the foreign publishing house “Springer” published a collection dedicated to the water resources of Central Asia. All works considered the reasons for the growing problems associated with water resources in the region.

It should be noted that the problems of water use in Central Asia have a long history. For centuries, people living in these territories have used water resources to meet their needs. With the development of industry and the expansion of agricultural land, water use issues have reached the level of state policy. In Central Asia, the issues of using water resources in the interests of the state began to be raised in the 19th century, when the Central Asian khanates became part of the Russian Empire. Several documents were prepared that showed that the Russian authorities were paying increased attention to this issue. Thus, in June 1877, the first governor-general of the Turkestan region K.P. von Kaufmann approved the first legal normative act—“Temporary rules on irrigation of the Turkestan region”. They completely abolished the usual procedure for the local population to use water resources, which caused discontent among the population. According to the document, water in irrigation ditches, canals and rivers was declared the property of the treasury of tsarist Russia, and the population received only a limited right to use water for irrigation purposes. This shows that the tsarist authorities sought to implement a water policy aimed at more efficient use of resources.

The next stage, which directly affected water resources, was the “Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature”, proposed in 1948. It concerned the development of irrigation systems in the Central Asian republics. According to the plan, in 1949 a program was launched that aimed to redistribute the flow of the Amu Darya River across the Aral Sea lowland. Then, in 1966, a program for large-scale land reclamation in the Soviet Union was approved at the plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU. Thus, both in the tsarist era and in the Soviet Union, a policy was implemented that

set the task of establishing control over water resources and increasing the efficiency of their use. In addition, during the Soviet period, a centralized water policy was implemented in the countries of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, which was based on the interests of the economy of the entire USSR.

In the Soviet Union, the republics did not pursue an independent policy in the water sphere. The central authorities solved the key problem related to the distribution and use of water resources. The water course of the Soviet authorities was aimed at pursuing a unified policy, which was developed based on the interests of both the Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan, as well as the other republics. A unified plan made it possible to eliminate contradictions and ensure the unity of the regional economy. “The Soviet system of inter-republican water relations, based on water allocation limits between them and the balance of contractual obligations between the republics and the union center. Regulation of the river flow of transboundary rivers was aimed at the balanced economic development of all five Central Asian republics, combining electricity generation and the development of the agricultural sector of the economy» [Sarsembekov, Mironenkov 2007]. At the same time, one of the “criteria for the operation of reservoirs was maximum overall benefit” [Grinyaev, Fomin 2009].

### **The Political Factor in the Water Problem**

After the collapse of the USSR, the water problem came to the forefront for the Central Asian countries, which tried unsuccessfully to resolve it. Historically, water resources in Central Asia are formed mainly in two large rivers: the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, which originate in the Pamir and Tien Shan mountains. The Syr Darya originates in Kyrgyzstan and flows into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (including through the densely populated Fergana Valley) and Kazakhstan. The Amu Darya originates in Tajikistan and flows into Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The average long-term flow of the Syr Darya is about 37 km<sup>3</sup>, and the Amu Darya is 78 km<sup>3</sup>.

In the conditions of the unified system that existed in the USSR, a mechanism was created that actually balanced the interests of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on the one hand, and Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan on the other. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are the most industrially developed countries, possessing large reserves of oil, gas and other resources. These countries have the largest population among the states of the region. Situated in the lower reaches, they are heavily dependent on the “upper” countries: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are best supplied with water resources and actually control the main watercourses of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, the main waterways of Central Asia.

After gaining independence, the Central Asian countries began to independently manage the water resources of transboundary rivers. They abandoned the Soviet principle of taking into account mutual interests and began to pursue their own policies in the area of water resource distribution. Each state proceeded from

its own interests, which were aimed at maximizing the use of water and energy potential. Accordingly, the policy of each state took little account of the interests of neighboring states, not correlating them with the general problem of water resources in the region.

The political aspects of relations between the Central Asian states on the issue of water resources use arose due to the lack of proper legal regulation. The lack of legislation regulating the “water problem” created the preconditions for the aggravation of bilateral relations and, as a result, brought the water issue to the political level. In fact, immediately after the collapse of the USSR, the issues of water use, due to their importance for the development of each of the states, came into the focus of attention of the leadership of the new countries. Access to water resources is a key problem, the solution of which directly affected the future of each country. Accordingly, the interests of neighboring states faded into the background [Zhiltsov, Bimenova 2015]. At the same time, the countries of the region at first did not exclude the possibility of using the experience of the Soviet Union, in which the principle of the “common pot” was in effect. This implied the prevalence of common approaches to solving the water problem over the interests of individual republics. An important political step in this direction was the initiative put forward by representatives of the national water management agencies of Central Asia and Kazakhstan in October 1991. At the time when the central authorities lost their influence, the leaders of the Central Asian republics understood that it was necessary to find a solution to the water problem, which was one of the key ones. The search for common approaches and interest in reaching a compromise in the new geopolitical and economic conditions were reflected in the Tashkent Statement. The document laid the foundations for the “negotiation process between the Central Asian states in the sphere of using the water resources of transboundary rivers. The statement discussed the joint use of water resources on common principles, taking into account the interests of all parties” [Pikulina 2013]. However, political support for the initiatives was not implemented in practice.

Nevertheless, the parties continued the political dialogue, signing (February 18, 1992, Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan)) the intergovernmental agreement “On cooperation in the sphere of joint management of the use and protection of water resources of interstate sources” and the agreement on the establishment of the Interstate Coordination Water Commission (ICWC). This decision demonstrated the readiness of the newly independent states of Central Asia to develop common approaches. Political agreement was based on accumulated experience. For this reason, the Central Asian countries confirmed their readiness to maintain the previously existing water management regime of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya basins and adhere to the established approaches to the division of transboundary water resources. “The discussion was about Protocol No. 413 of the Scientific and Technical Council of the USSR Ministry of Land Reclamation and Water Management for the Syr Darya, signed in February 1984, and Protocol No. 566 of the Scientific and Technical Council of the USSR Ministry of Land Reclamation

and Water Management for the Amu Darya, signed in September 1987. These documents provided for the annual distribution of water between the countries of the Aral Sea basin, although seasonal distribution was not taken into account in them” [Iskandarhonova 2007].

However, the course towards developing common approaches did not correspond to the political aspirations of the elites of the Central Asian countries, who intended to establish their statehood and solve economic problems at the expense of their neighbors. Political egoism began to manifest itself in full force as problems in the economy of each of the states grew. As a result, the treaties and agreements concluded during the Soviet period were not in demand. “The most acute interstate contradictions manifested themselves in relation to water use regimes in the Syr Darya River basin, in the reservoirs of the Naryn-Syr Darya cascade, primarily Toktogul” [Kuzmina 2007]. In Soviet times, the flow of the Syr Darya was regulated by the reservoirs of the Naryn-Syr Darya cascade, primarily Toktogul, in a regime that was aimed at irrigation in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

The conflict of interests between individual countries emerged in 1993, when Uzbekistan left Kyrgyzstan without gas due to debts. “In response, Bishkek released gas from the Toktogul reservoir” [Guseynov, Goncharenko 2010]. Kyrgyzstan explained the change in the operating schedule of the Toktogul reservoir by the need to produce electricity in the winter and accumulate it in the summer. Such actions by the Kyrgyz and Uzbek sides were sanctioned at the highest level.

Of course, there were factors that to some extent forced Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to act unilaterally. The economy of Kyrgyzstan was negatively affected by the breakdown of economic ties within the region and the increase in the cost of hydrocarbon resources. As a result, Kyrgyzstan, like Tajikistan, faced an energy crisis. The “simple” solution seemed to be to change the operating mode of reservoirs and use water resources exclusively in their own interests. As a result, the water issue was politicized, since it became the focus of attention of the heads of states. However, the unilateral actions of each of the parties, regardless of the reasons, had a negative impact on bilateral relations.

The duality of the policies pursued by the Central Asian countries was again revealed in 1993. The Central Asian countries once again held negotiations on water issues and tried to resolve differences on the issue of water distribution and joint use of water resources. An “Agreement on Cooperation in the Sphere of Joint Management, Use and Protection of Water Resources of Interstate Sources” was adopted. However, in political terms, this document contradicted the interests of the Central Asian states, each of which firmly stood on its own positions.

The reasons for the politicization of the water issue should be seen in the unwillingness of the new countries formed in Central Asia to compromise solutions. The line of making unilateral decisions, without taking into account the interests of neighboring states, prevailed, which reflected the political approaches of the countries of the region. For this reason, the adoption of the Nukus Declaration by the Central Asian countries in 1995 did not change the situation with water resources. The document emphasized the importance of previously



signed agreements regulating relations in the sphere of water resources. The countries of the region confirmed their commitment to the principle of using water resources in the interests of all states. However, no practical mechanism for solving water problems was proposed.

The issue of water resources was politicized due to the monetization of the water issue. This approach received support in a number of Central Asian countries at the highest level. Kyrgyzstan actively promoted this position, defending its right to own the water in transboundary waterways. As the water deficit increased, the issue of water ownership received new impetus. As a result, due to the “high birth rate and unemployment in Central Asia, the water problem has become a serious destabilizing factor in the region” [Zhiltsov 2001]. In addition, for the newly independent countries of Central Asia, “the most difficult problem was water allocation” [Zhiltsov, Zonn 2008]. Having destroyed the previous system, the Central Asian countries were unable to offer a new system, which provoked mutual claims. They were primarily related to determining the volume of water resources. Each country stopped taking into account the interests of its neighbors, pursuing a selfish policy [Ibatullin, Yasinsky, Mironenkov 2009]. At the same time, the countries demonstrated their readiness to solve the water problem. Then, there remained “the absence of interstate regulation of water resources necessary to meet the uneven needs for irrigation water throughout the year” [Vinokurov et al. 2021].

In 1998, an agreement was concluded between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan “On the Use of Water and Energy Resources of the Syr Darya River Basin”. Tajikistan joined the agreement in 1999. This document was of a framework nature, although it did set out the principles of compensation. At the same time, it “did not describe the economic mechanism of the relationship between hydropower and irrigation” [Petrov 2010]. As a result, the downstream countries continued to experience a deficit of water in the summer, during the period of greatest need for water, and faced flooding and inundation of water management facilities in the winter.

The adopted documents did not contribute to solving the problem of efficient use of water resources of transboundary rivers of Central Asia, since they were not supported by practical compensation mechanisms. The political course of each of the states was aimed at independently solving the problem and ignoring the interests of neighbors. In turn, due to economic problems, the downstream countries were not ready to compensate the upstream countries for losses from changes in the operating mode of reservoirs. Moreover, “each of the states in the region expected to independently solve the emerging problems in the sphere of water resources and, through pressure on neighbors, achieve a positive result for itself. In fact, it was a conflict of national development programs of all Central Asian states” [Borishpolets 2010]. As a result, interstate relations periodically worsened between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on the issue of using the water resources of transboundary rivers.

The causes of conflict situations between the countries of the region in the sphere of water resources of transboundary rivers were hidden in the provisions that were recorded in national legislation. In the documents of a number of Central Asian countries, water was defined as a resource that belongs to the state. In the Water Code of Tajikistan (Article 4), adopted in December 1993, water resources were considered as the exclusive property of the state. A similar provision is contained in the Law of Kyrgyzstan “On Water” (Article 5), adopted in January 1994. These two states occupied and continue to occupy key positions in terms of control over water resources, which was reflected in the first years after the collapse of the USSR. However, similar provisions were spelled out in the Law of Uzbekistan “On Water and Water Use” (Article 3), adopted in May 1993. It speaks of the ownership of water resources by the state. A similar position is reflected in the Water Code of Turkmenistan, adopted in June 1993. The Water Code of Kazakhstan (Article 8), adopted in July 2003, speaks of the exclusive ownership of water resources by the state. These documents were subsequently supplemented and clarified, but the main thesis in them remained unchanged—water resources are the exclusive property of the state, which regulates their use at its own discretion.

The politicization of the water issue was reinforced by decisions taken in the upstream states of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which adhered to the line that they were the sole owners of water resources. In 2001, Kyrgyzstan adopted the law “On the interstate use of water bodies, water resources and water management facilities of the Kyrgyz Republic”. The document emphasized the country’s rights to water resources and water management facilities within the state’s borders, and also noted that water has a price. Tajikistan took a similar position.

The countries of the region adhered to their own ideas regarding the use of water resources of transboundary rivers. Moreover, many domestic laws of the Central Asian countries, bilateral and multilateral agreements do not contain a definition of “transboundary rivers”. Instead, the terms “water resource”, “water-energy resource”, etc. are mainly used. Such an approach contradicts “the provisions of international law, which considers issues of transboundary water resources and creates significant difficulties in the use of international legislation” [Iskandarhonova 2007]. As a result, “the insufficiently clear understanding and very weak application by the Central Asian states of the principles and norms of international law in the field of use and protection of transboundary resources was one of the restraining factors in solving the problems existing in the region” [Amanzholov 2007].

Intergovernmental agreements aimed at regulating the use of water resources of transboundary rivers of Central Asia have not removed the problem from the agenda. Accordingly, the development of a mechanism that takes into account the interests of all Central Asian countries in the use of water and energy potential remains among the priorities of the Central Asian states.

As a result, despite the agreements and signed documents, a mechanism for joint water resource management has not been developed. Moreover, the



diametrically opposed positions of the countries in the region do not allow for the resolution of water problems. In the absence of legislation regulating the use of water resources, the Central Asian countries began to act unilaterally. Such decisions were made at the highest level in each of the Central Asian states, thereby emphasizing the political nature of the foreign policy pursued in this area. The absence of clear legislation regulating the use of transboundary river hydro resources also complicates the search for mutually beneficial solutions. “The Central Asian countries are experiencing significant difficulties in comparing fuel and energy resources and water resources, which each of the countries in the region is still proposing to exchange” [Auelbaev, Erzhanov 2009].

### Key Issues

In recent decades, water in Central Asia has become a resource that is necessary not only for the development of the region, but also for individual states. At the same time, the political significance of water resources has increased many times over. Water management remains a key issue for the countries of the region. Tasks related to the development of agriculture, electricity production, and expansion of the production base are closely intertwined with it. Every year, it is becoming increasingly difficult to fulfill the planned activities in these and other sectors of the economy, since access to water resources is limited due to the policies of neighbors in the region or due to the growing deficit of water resources.

Back at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, forecasts were published showing that the average amount of water resources per capita on Earth would decrease from the current 750 m<sup>3</sup> of water per year to 450 m<sup>3</sup> of water per year by 2025 [Orlov, Chechevishnikov, Chernyavsky 2011]. These forecasts are generally justified, since the deficit of water resources has increased. Population growth will increase the demand for water resources, since there is a need to generate additional energy [Glanz 2018].

The political course of the Central Asian countries aimed at independently solving the water problem faced growing economic problems. First of all, the level of infrastructure financing has significantly decreased. Thus, “from 1994 to 2020, the volume of water withdrawal for municipal and domestic needs increased by 2 times, and investments in drinking water supply infrastructure were inadequate to this growth. To meet the challenges in 2025–2030, the sector needs an additional \$2 billion in investments annually” [Vinokurov et al. 2024].

Another problem was the change in the operating mode of large reservoirs—the transfer of the operation of hydroelectric complexes from the irrigation mode to the energy mode. As a result, there was a “violation of the design operating modes of reservoirs and hydroelectric power plants” [Vinokurov et al. 2024]. This course, which was political in nature, since such decisions were made not by specialists who were engaged in the operation of hydroelectric power plants and reservoirs, but at the highest level, led to conflict situations. The upstream countries sought

to increase hydropower production, which was contrary to the interests of the downstream countries, which were interested in receiving water in the summer. Such inconsistencies and divergences of interests in the use of water and energy resources exacerbated the situation in the region and between individual countries, and negatively affected interstate relations in the region.

Water resources have become a source of potential socio-political, ethno-national and interstate conflicts. This is due to the divergence of policies of countries located in the upper and lower parts of transboundary rivers. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (according to various estimates, they control 80 % of all surface water reserves in the region), possessing significant water resources, release water to generate electricity not only in the summer, but also in the winter. Reservoirs built in Soviet times in the upper reaches of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya allow regulating the flow entering the countries located in the lower reaches. As a result, having such a powerful “lever” of influence, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are able to influence neighboring countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

The politicization of water resource issues is greatly influenced by climate change, which is rapidly occurring in Central Asia. As a result, countries in the region are increasingly faced with the problem of reduced precipitation and glacier coverage. Over the past decades, the area of glaciers, which are the main source of filling the transboundary Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, has decreased by about a third. This has a negative impact on the flow of these rivers. At the same time, the population is rapidly increasing, which leads to increased pressure on economic and social systems.

### Recent Developments

In recent years, the situation with water resources in Central Asia has worsened. At the same time, political relations between the countries of the region have undergone positive changes. Now the political course of the countries of the region is aimed at finding mutually acceptable solutions, expanding cooperation in the water and energy sector. Thus, at the VI Consultative Meeting of the Leaders of the Central Asian Countries, which was held in August 2024, it was emphasized that “water use issues are being systematically resolved”.<sup>1</sup>

The signed multilateral agreements between Central Asian states confirm the direction of action to solve the water problem. One of such examples was the cooperation between Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 2023–2024, that signed documents on the joint implementation of the Kambarata HPP-1 construction project. The achievement of these agreements shows a change

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<sup>1</sup> *The 6th Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia was held under the chairmanship of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. August 9, 2024. Retrieved September 17, 2024, from <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/pod-predsdatelstvom-kasym-zhomarta-tokaeva-sostoyalas-vi-konsultativnaya-vstrecha-glav-gosudarstv-centralnoy-azii-971327>*

in the policy of the Central Asian states, that expect to solve the problem of water shortage through this project.

The countries have created a joint company in which Kyrgyzstan owns 34 %, and the other participants own 33 % each. The cost of the project is about 6 billion dollars. Since none of the Central Asian states has such funds, a political decision has been made to attract funds from international financial institutions. The World Bank is playing an active role in promoting the project, having already promised to provide the Kyrgyz side with about 500 million dollars. In addition, the World Bank has secured the support of the Asian Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction. Such involvement of international financial institutions may lead to increased geopolitical rivalry between Western states that implement water policy in Central Asia, as well as Russia and China, which have their own interests in this area in the region.

Demonstrating political will to solve the water problem does not reduce the urgency of this issue. Bilateral and multilateral agreements are implemented against the background of decision-making within each of the states, which are forced to pay increased attention to this area, since water problems are growing. Thus, Uzbekistan was forced to “continue reducing rice crops”.<sup>2</sup> In turn, Kazakhstan is seeking to develop a set of measures aimed at reducing the negative impact of the growing deficit of water resources [Zhiltsov, Zonn 2019]. These issues are reflected in the draft Water Code of the country, adopted by parliament in the first reading. The document sets out five principles, among which it is necessary to implement “complex use of surface and groundwater”.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

In recent years, there has been no shortage of forecasts regarding the situation with water resources in Central Asia and, accordingly, assessments of the future nature of relations between the Central Asian states. They are based on the growing deficit of water resources in the region, which are divided among national states. The current situation reflects the results of political decisions made after the collapse of the USSR, which practically did not take into account the interests of neighbors. The lack of progress in the creation of supranational (or interstate) structures in the region to regulate water relations or the introduction of alternative options for obtaining water continues to politicize the issue. At the same time, various options for transferring water from neighboring states, for example, from Russia, are being discussed at the political level. However, in the current conditions of geopolitical confrontation, the reduction of financial opportunities on the Russian side, and

<sup>2</sup> *Hope for Siberian Rivers: Central Asian Countries Share Water Again.* (January 17, 2024). Retrieved October 17, 2024, from <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/19740749>

<sup>3</sup> *The Majilis of Kazakhstan adopted the draft of the new Water Code in the first reading.* (November 29, 2024). Retrieved November 17, 2024, from <https://www.ritmeurasia.ru/news--2024-11-29--mazhilis-kazahstana-prinjal-proekt-novogo-vodnogo-kodeksa-v-pervom-chtenii-77124>

the lack of funds in the Central Asian states, the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects is practically impossible.

Against the backdrop of discussions on ways to resolve the water issue, the water deficit is increasing, the physical volumes of which have decreased in the last decade. This process tends to continue. The growing deficit of water resources is associated with climate change and the policies pursued by the states of the region. Climate change has already led to a reduction in the area of glaciers and snow cover in the mountains. As a result, the volume of water resources has significantly decreased. In recent years, the Amu Darya has lost about a third of its water resources. Against the backdrop of a trend of decreasing the volume of available water, the demand for it is increasing. This is due to the growth of the population in the countries of Central Asia, ambitious plans for the development of national economies, as well as the ongoing course of the countries of the region to build hydraulic structures.<sup>4</sup>

The existing factors were supplemented by the “factor” of Afghanistan, which began construction of the Kosh-Tepa canal. The implementation of this project will increase the water intake from the Amu Darya. In addition, the Afghan side has intensified the construction of the “Dasht-i-Jun hydroelectric complex”, which will be able to accumulate a significant part of the summer flow of the Panj River.<sup>5</sup> The construction of these facilities may worsen the situation with water resources for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

In general, it can be said that the countries located in the upper and lower reaches of transboundary watercourses are dissatisfied with each other and are interested in changing the regime of the current agreements on the use of water resources. However, such decisions taken at the highest level will be political in nature and will inevitably worsen interstate relations.

At the same time, existing water agreements do not benefit anyone. The states where the rivers originate believe that the lower countries receive far more water than they themselves do, while the financial burden of developing and maintaining hydraulic facilities primarily falls on the upper states.

The key problem for the region is that Central Asian countries have not moved beyond declarations. There are still no common political approaches to regulating transboundary watercourses, let alone mechanisms capable of actually regulating the use of water resources in the interests of all parties.

In recent years, the Central Asian countries have been holding consultations. However, they are more focused on discussing the current situation than on developing practical steps that could establish multilateral cooperation.

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<sup>4</sup> Zhiltsov S.S. (June 16, 2024). *Central Asia: in search of a common water policy*. Retrieved September 23, 2024, from [https://www.ng.ru/dipkurer/2024-06-16/11\\_9028\\_asia.html](https://www.ng.ru/dipkurer/2024-06-16/11_9028_asia.html)

<sup>5</sup> *New water agreements in Central Asia: what should Kyrgyzstan do?* (August 8, 2023). Retrieved October 24, 2024, from [https://www.water.gov.kg/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=2163:novye-soglasheniya-po-vode-v-tsentralnoj-azii-chto-delat-kyrgyzstanu&Itemid=1437&lang=ru](https://www.water.gov.kg/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=2163:novye-soglasheniya-po-vode-v-tsentralnoj-azii-chto-delat-kyrgyzstanu&Itemid=1437&lang=ru)

The question of what will happen when the water deficit reaches a critical limit is becoming increasingly acute, after which countries will be faced with a choice: to agree to expand cooperation and jointly seek unpopular and difficult solutions or to try to solve the problem unilaterally. The latter option will lead to an aggravation of the situation in the region. Without abandoning national egoism in the water sector, it will be virtually impossible to solve this problem.

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