

The Central Asian Water Crisis

The "Upstream" against the "DownStream" Countries

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The deficit of water resources that may in the future be in greater demand than petroleum and natural gas has already become a reality for many districts of the inner Eurasia. Central Asia has not enjoyed the surplus of water for quite some time. The water problem is getting more and more charged with geopolitical meanings, directly affecting Russian interests.

At the start of 2009, when on the one hand there was in Russia a growth of interest in old Soviet projects of building big hydro power stations in Tajikistan and Kirghizia, on the other activities of Uzbekistan that essentially began forming in the region a sort of the "water bloc" were also evident. Russian diplomacy made attempts to have a balance between the interests of "the water source countries" (Tajikistan, Kirghizia) that control the heads of the biggest water arteries, the Amu Darya and Syr-Darya, and the "downstream" countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenia) with their critical dependence on the water flow from the sources, but these attempts were almost futile.

Should the "bloc"-type geopolitical constellation be established in Central Asia, the standoff between the "upstream" and the "downstream" countries in their debate on the expediency of building big hydro power facilities on the trans-border rivers Amu Darya and Syr-Darya will be inevitable.

On April 13 Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry posted a press release, whose gist can be summed up by the following two points:

- 1) Construction of new hydro power stations is a matter of concern for all the states in the region and it would aggravate the already difficult water supply situation to "the downstream regions" resulting in violations of the fragile ecological situation;
- 2) The problems relating to water and energy supply in Central Asia should be solved without interference of "third" countries (read: the Russian Federation). According to Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry developers of large-scale hydro power projects should take into account the interests of all the states in the region and be thoroughly investigated by international experts to assess their technological and environmental safety as well as guarantee maintenance of water balance. Violation of these principles could have "unpredictable environmental, economic, social and political consequences." In the last several years the problems of water supply faced by "the downstream countries" was aggravated by shortage of water whose level in the Amu Darya and the Syr-Darya is, according to Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry, about 70% of the average annual standard.

Uzbekistan's foreign ministry views the Kambaratinsk hydro power station (HPS) currently

under construction in Kirghizia and the planned construction of the Rogunsk HPS in Tajikistan, as the Central Asian environment least friendly. The construction of both power stations was launched in the USSR and is still unfinished. The rated capacity of the Kambaratinsk-1 HPS in the mid-stream Naryn, a tributary of the Syr-Darya, is 1,900 MWt and a rated annual output of electricity at 5.1bln KWt/h. Uzbekistan's government plans to have the capacity of the Rogunsk HPS in the Vakhsh basin almost twice as high, up to 3,600 MWt with an annual electricity output at up to 13.4bln KWt/h.

Russia is expected to play a decisive role in the construction of both power stations, becoming the principal investor in both projects. In October 2008 during the visit to Bishkek of Russian president Dmitry Medvedev agreements on the participation of Russian companies in the construction of the Kambaratinsk power stations in Kirghizia were signed. In November, the head of the RF Presidential Administration S.Naryshkin pledged assistance in the construction of the Rogunsk power station in Tajikistan.

Uzbekistan has the biggest population among Central Asian countries, about two-thirds of whom reside in rural agricultural areas; it depends more than others on water supply from the "upstream" countries. The Tashkent authorities are concerned over potential usage of water as a tool of political and economic pressure upon its neighbours. The statement president Medvedev made during his visit to Uzbekistan's capital in January to the effect that implementation of major hydro power projects should meet the interests of all the countries in the region did not allay their fears.

In turn, erection of hydro power stations is essential for the Central Asian "upstream" countries. Unlike Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenia, Kirghizia and Tajikistan do not have significant oil and natural gas resources to provide heating and electricity to its population and economy. The principal suppliers of electricity in Kirghizia and Uzbekistan are hydro power stations. Water in their reservoirs is needed for watering the fields in summer in the "downstream" states, and for the production of electricity in winter - in the "upstream" ones. These contradictions were aggravated after the dismembering of the Soviet Union, when its former republics that were oil- and gas-rich began selling them at market prices, whereas the new independent states that were unable to purchase energy carriers in adequate amounts, had to dramatically increase, electricity production in winter, whose output, nevertheless, is critically inadequate. The only way out for Kirghizia and Tajikistan is erection of new power stations to both overcome the deficit of electricity and sell it to the neighbouring countries.

The interests of "the downstream" countries in the area of water usage coincide and objectively contradict the interests of their "upstream" neighbours to build new hydro power stations. During a telephone conversation in April 2009 the presidents I.Karimov of Uzbekistan and G.Berdymukhammedov of Turkmenia they "noted the significance of joint efforts in working out new approaches to finding solutions to the water problem, common to the countries of the region, as well as that of the Aral Sea." Earlier I.Karimov discussed the water problem with Kazakhstan's president N.Nazarbayev. And then Kazakhstan's prime-minister paid a visit to Tashkent. Analysts say that these negotiations aim at working out a common position of both the "downstream" countries with an eye to construction of new hydro power stations in Kirghizia and Tajikistan.

The difference of interests of the "upstream" and "downstream" Central Asian countries that poses a threat of ending in an inter-state conflict is both a diplomatic and geopolitical challenge to Russia. Refusing to build power stations in Kirghizia and Tajikistan and ignoring

their interests would be tantamount to inviting other states, primarily China and Iran that have energy-related interests in Central Asia. However, it is not less significant for Russia to maintain close ties with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the oil-and-gas area. In a word, the Central Asian “water problem” has questions for the Russian diplomacy that need to be addressed without delay.

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