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Divided we fall ... or rise? Tajikistan–Kyrgyzstan border dilemma

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Abstract

The Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border remains one of the last undefined frontiers in the Commonwealth of Independent States, where the governments are reluctant to act against the wishes of their border communities and force delimitation solutions that may cause social protests. Uncertainty of territorial arrangements persists; however, the era of commonality and interdependence may be at its end due to the establishment of a border as a means of spatial control. Border drawing reflects the divergent development trajectories of the new states, seeking to break out of an interdependence pattern. Borderlands’ interactions become more conflictual. Generation change and a loss of common language work to widen the inter-communal gap. Ethnicity and identity factors grew in significance as association with the nation-states increased, and a border expresses a symbol of nationhood in this paradigm. Crucially, a border justifies a security regime, reinforced by international assistance policies, to project power over the territory. Actions of security structures cause grievances but also signify a protective arm of the state, a role that the border communities appreciate, themselves acting as a collective border guard and projecting their fears of encroachment onto the borders. The expansion of the Eurasian Economic Union became a new factor that could have served to alleviate the pressure to divide territory and assets, but this could work only if two countries joined it at the same period. With this option unavailable, a territorial impasse has been reached.

Contested border spatiality

As the Soviet era fades away, the Kyrgyz–Tajik border remains one of the last undefined frontiers where the USSR’s legacy in the new Eurasia is distinctly felt. In 25 years of independence, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan succeeded in delimiting 519 km out of 978 km of their mutual border, while the remaining 459 km in densely populated lowlands are subject to mutual claims and include 58 separately contested sections. Throughout these times, the capitals of both countries have been reluctant to act decisively and preferred a status quo of unsettled borders, being keen to preserve positive interstate relations and feeling unable to move against the wishes of their border communities.

Inherited Soviet boundaries were not drawn as impermeable borders of independent states but were in an ongoing process of adjustment to population movement and economic developments. First, the ethnic composition was changing throughout the Soviet history, as people from the mountains had been resettled onto plains populated by other ethnic groups. Second, the borders were redrawn to suit the evolving agricultural practices, which witnessed increases in both...
irrigation and the amount of cultivated area.\textsuperscript{1} Third, parity commissions from the Tajik and Kyrgyz Union Republics met every decade to adjust borders to the land use of the moment,\textsuperscript{2} but solutions that addressed one problem tended to create another, which triggered new rounds of revisions later.

This legacy presently gives grounds to conflicting territorial claims: Tajikistan insists on restoration of “historical justice” as reflected in the 1924–1927 maps, which show that many contested lands used to belong to the Tajik Union Republic, while Kyrgyzstan stands by the 1958 maps drawn after several waves of resettlement. Discourse often attributes the problem to the “divide-and-rule” intentions of Soviet planners who left the ill-defined and ill-suited borders as a deliberate legacy without examining the arguments behind continuous border revisions of the Soviet era.\textsuperscript{3} Presently, this is a genuine puzzle with no obvious territorial solution fair to all parties, which has led to multiple security incidents and has narrowly avoided an armed conflict.

The reasoning that explains the insecurity in borderlands popular among donors and aid agencies is that the conflicts arise from threatened livelihood and resource sharing. Indeed, tensions often start from a hampered access to life necessities, such as water, grazing land or markets. This article acknowledges the validity of this perspective but argues that the underlying conflict driver is the very establishment of the border and the culture of projection-of-force that came with it. A border (1) expresses a symbol of new nationhood and contributes to ethnic consolidation, (2) justifies a security regime to mark control over the territory, and (3) reflects divergent development trajectories of the new states that plan their own futures. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) could have served as an overarching umbrella to downplay the significance of borders as security regimes and alleviate the pressure to divide territory and assets, but this option could work only if the two countries joined at the same time or within a short distance from each other.

The article addresses the question why it proved so difficult to establish the border in this case when other post-Soviet states with similar legacies mostly resolved their territorial issues. I attribute these reasons to an increasingly strong affiliation between territory and identity, population density with few natural geographical features to act as separation landmarks and reluctance of the states to impose solutions against the will of their border communities. I argue that the conditions remain fragile and prone to sudden deterioration. While the talk of border delimitation continues, the absence of a democratically negotiated or an authoritarianly imposed solution signifies that the very task is impossible and is best abandoned. More creative solutions based on shared sovereignty and recognition of interdependence must be found to achieve sustainable security.

The article bases its argument on Newman’s perspective that rather than viewing international boundaries as static markers of the formal extent of state control, they should be conceived as part of dynamic processes that socially construct differences between groups of people.\textsuperscript{4} He stresses the importance of territory and its physical delimiters in the formation of ethnic and national identities and applies the term re-territorialisation to describe the relationship between national identity and territorial reconfiguration. Formation of national identities is strongly tied up with both the changing spatial configurations of political power and the idea of a “homeland.” Ethnic/national groups aspire to strengthen the link between territory and identity when they create new

\textsuperscript{1} Madeleine Reeves in Bruce Pannier, "Majlis podcast: Mapping conflict along Ferghana Valley’s borders," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 3 April 2016, \url{http://www.rferl.org/content/majlis-podcast-mapping-conflict-along-ferghana-valley-borders/2751487.html#hash=relatedInfoContainer}.

\textsuperscript{2} Christine Bichsel, Conflict Transformation in Central Asia: Irrigation Disputes in the Ferghana Valley (London: Routledge, 2009).


boundaries of separation, using symbols of statehood.\(^5\) This is the slow-moving process underway in the Ferghana Valley that I analyse.

I invoke Kuzmits’s concept of “unruly borderlands,” where the state dominates or absorbs the local elite, but neither the state nor the security apparatus gains a commanding position over the population, making the borderland difficult to control.\(^6\) The dialectics of the separation processes at the grassroot and the elite levels is quite complex, and local societies are important actors in their own right, showing the capitals’ limitation in terms of their actions.

Security perceptions are important for the analysis of border problems. Madeleine Reeves explains that a border expresses a desire for stability in unstable contexts: “being bordered often matters intensely to those living at the border and it most matters precisely in those contexts where the institutional and geographical locus of the ‘state’ is in flux.” She situates “territory” within the realm of feeling: fear and suffering, perhaps, but also the object of hope and the site of practical claims making.\(^7\) A border is experienced as a place of limits and gaps\(^8\) where we can observe “the improvisatory work of everyday state formation,”\(^9\) which has to “feel” its way through the bordering project.

I further argue that the world of cross-border interactions based on multiple spatiality, interconnected localised identities, delicate patterns of interdependence, competition and commonality that Reeves describes\(^10\) is at its end. Newly established sovereignty and fascination with its attributes present formidable commodities to be reckoned with. As Reeves writes, “our imagination of borders is fundamentally constituted by the state’s own categories and cartography.”\(^11\) The ability to erect borders, deploy guards, fly the flag and claim a sovereign, undivided territory is greatly valued: “where there exists a notion of a state, the notion of border is also present, if this is a sovereign state.”\(^12\)

As the “project of territorial sovereignty” gains momentum, harsh realities of separation kick in. The question is what is replacing the old world of commonality and interdependence. How much do principles of territoriality and sovereignty matter for human experience at the borderlands? To what extent does addressing livelihood issues necessitate a guarded frontier? Would the future bear more segregation or interdependency? The answers are shaped by the evolving relationship between ethnicity, nation and state, wherein three factors are important: ethnic consolidation accelerated by generation change, security deployment and economic interdependency. The article analyses their interplay and how they affect the policies at the inter-state level in order to be able to make a projection into the future. I call for what Martinez terms “integrated borderland,” which includes the removal of all barriers and obstacles to cross-border communication, exchange and movement of people, goods, services and capital, along with the development of a common cultural and political cross-border identity.\(^13\)

My field research consisted of key informant interviews, focus groups and field observations. It was conducted in 2013, 2014 and 2016 in Soghd oblast of Tajikistan and border areas of Kyrgyzstan (Batken, Osh and Jalalabad oblasts). It builds upon prior research in 2003–2005 in the same territories, which allows tracing the dynamics of change. The article uses data from the M-

\(^{5}\) Newman, “Boundaries.”
\(^{9}\) Reeves, *Border Work*, 17.
\(^{10}\) Reeves, “Materialising state space,” 1277–1313; Reeves, *Border Work*.
\(^{11}\) Reeves, *Border Work*, 236.
\(^{12}\) Interview with Bakyr Jolchiev, Batken oblast administration, August 2013.
Vector attitude survey conducted for the United Nations Development Programme in seven cross-border clusters of Kyrgyzstan in 2015.¹⁴

**Ethnicity and identity formation**

In a way, problems on the Tajik–Kyrgyz border are not new. These lands were subject to conflicts in 1936, 1938, 1969, 1975 and 1989. Disagreements over land led to open confrontations, such as that between Ak-Sai and Voruh in 1975 and 1989 and that between Uch-Dobo and Khoja-i Alo in 1989, when a dispute over water escalated into violence with the use of stones, farm tools and firearms. Violence was halted by deployment of the Soviet Special Forces and army regiments. Several Soviet attempts to resolve the border issues by setting up conciliation commissions consisting of representatives of the two Republics failed to reach an agreement. In the aftermath of the 1989 violence, a parity commission sought to reconcile the sides, but it struggled with border delineation, as the parties brought documents, maps and eye witness accounts as proofs for their conflicting claims. Still, most of the time, the communities lived with their resource-sharing disputes in peace and developed mechanisms of adaptation to their seasonal dynamics.

What has changed is that the factor of ethnicity has grown in significance since early independence, as association of the populations with the nation-states increased, although scholarship on the region often tends to downplay the significance of ethnic differences amid other processes and characteristics.¹⁵ Still, Reeves observes that “in this particular part of the Ferghana Valley basin, ethnicity has come to be so very salient as an everyday ‘practical category’.”¹⁶ Whereas in the past people used to associate mainly with their particular localities and saw their neighbours as associates in that locality, in the 2003–2013 decade, ethnic differences became more pronounced. Communities came to more readily affiliate with their ethnic groups and tend to stereotype the opponent in increasingly ethnic terms.

National-patriotic values have grown stronger—and a pasture dispute gets interpreted as a matter of national survival. Land is not a mere agricultural resource: it has a symbolic meaning for nationhood, still quite new. As explained by a local analyst, “each side has to drink enough of its sovereignty before it can compromise.”¹⁷ State action works to emphasise the dominant ethnicity by claiming a cultural space: Tajikistan renames geographical locations to erase Turkic designations and expand a Tajik linguistic presence. As a result, in 2016, Qairaqqum, a town in the Kyrgyz border vicinity, became Guliston and the Soviet-era artificial water reservoir of the same name was renamed the “Tajik Sea.”¹⁸

Fear became a catalyst in the border communities’ identity formation. Following Reeves’s¹⁹ call for a dynamic approach to place, I identify borders as places where people project their fears onto each other. The communities and local authorities largely do not expect positive intentions from their neighbours but suspect them of ambitions to encroach onto their territory, deprive them of resources and assets, and project instability across the borders. They fear that they will be encircled, trapped into uncomfortable arrangements and harassed by security structures.

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¹⁴ Building capacity for conflict prevention and mitigation in cross-border areas of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, M-Vector (Dushanbe) on behalf of UNDP, 2015 survey draft, unpublished.


¹⁶ Reeves, “Materialising state space,” 1308.

¹⁷ Interview with a Kyrgyz local expert who wishes to be anonymous, Osh, August 2013.


Demography adds to fears of the Kyrgyz communities and increases their sense of vulnerability. Three municipalities of Isfara district of Tajikistan — Voruh, Chorkuh and Surkh — are populated by about 100,000 inhabitants. They are faced by smaller Kyrgyz municipalities of Ak-Sai, Ak Taty and Samarkandek in Batken district with barely 20,000 inhabitants, who perceive that demographic pressure prompts territorial expansion of their neighbours who need more and more land to survive. The future appears unpromising — in this paradigm, hardship and isolation would foster depopulation leaving fewer Kyrgyz to oppose the encroaching Tajiks.

Compared to the early 2000s, ethnic differences have acquired a more negative connotation, and local actors increasingly perceive everyday conflicts in ethnic terms. Problems that originally start as mundane village disputes assume a character of ethnic polarisation and end in arguments such as “[this is our historical land] and “you have no right to be here.” Such calls carry an emotional resonance, evoke feelings of patriotism and enable mobilisation of a larger constituency for defence of the “territorial integrity” even over petty disputes.

Inter-ethnic relations are worse in areas with a prior history of conflicts. The M-Vector 2015 survey returned data that the population of the Ak-Tatyr/Uch–Dobo/Tash–Tumshuk cluster (predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz) demonstrated the most negative attitude towards Tajiks as a neighbouring ethnic group (score: 1.3% out of a maximum of 6.0) because these villages had numerous problems with the bordering Khoja-i Alo, a village in Chorkuh municipality of Tajikistan. By contrast, the Arca–Kostakoz cluster, wherein conflicts were rare and non-violent, returned a score of 4.8. Measured on the Bogardus Social Distance Scale, the distance was the biggest between the majority Kyrgyz and Tajik groups as compared to the ethnic minorities (Uzbeks and Russians) living in the same area. Overall, the level of trust by the Kyrgyz group in the seven clusters towards their Tajik neighbours scored 3.4 out of a maximum of 6.0.

Dangers stemming from others do not have to be objectively verifiable, as “danger is an effect of interpretation.” In this paradigm, border posts are believed to “move” every year by 50 cm and, in 20 years, gain 10 m of territory. Even cleaning of waterways is contentious, suspected of being a part of a step-by-step territorial acquisition plot. Kyrgyz respondents in Ak-Sai municipality were convinced that the boundary moves closer into their land. As a result, Kyrgyz border guards obstruct Tajik farmers from cleaning trans-boundary waterways to prevent their “subversive activity.”

This is not to say that ethnicity is the sole or even major preoccupation for those living in borderlands at the time of peace. It moves to the forefront at crisis times, when a collective identity is threatened, as during the June 2010 events in Kyrgyzstan, and mobilisation along ethnic lines occurs. In such circumstances, populations act as a collective border guard, battling insecurity. Perception of a collective threat fosters appreciation of their role in the line of defence against outsiders and strengthens nationhood associations. Local authorities, in their turn, encourage creation of a human buffer along the borderline, so that their citizens occupy land and housing, and prevent emergence of a vacuum into which the other can move in. Construction of restaurants, hotels and petrol stations along the Khujand–Konibodom Highway separating the two states is interpreted as occupying a space that can be claimed later.

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21 Bogardus Social Distance Scale was developed in 1924 by Emory Bogardus and is widely used to measure prejudice in attitudes.
22 Respondents agree, for instance that their children’s teacher can come from the other group but would not concede a closer relationship.
25 UNDP-organised workshop for the local analysts from the Kyrgyz and Tajik bordering municipalities who participate as early warning field monitors in the “Cross-border Cooperation for Sustainable Peace and Development,” UN programme, held in Khujand, Tajikistan, in March 2016. The other view expressed was that such construction is done by Tajikistan citizens who do not wish to abide by their law that restricts wedding celebrations.
Trend towards ethnic purity in settlement practice reflects a sense of fear. Kyrgyz and Tajik families who are in minority in each other’s villages seek to move to their ethnic majority municipalities to avoid becoming hostages in future crises. The authorities hope that people would find ways of swapping land and houses and that they would not be confronted with pressure to protect their ethnic kin on the other side if they are threatened. Ethnic solidarity transpires across borders. In December 2011, a fight broke out in Andarak (Kyrgyzstan) between ethnic Kyrgyz and Tajik villagers. Tajik young men from Jabbor Rasulov district (Tajikistan) quickly mobilised to drive to Andarak on receiving calls from their Andarak Tajik friends that “nashikh b’yut” “our guys are beaten.”

Ethnic affiliations affect the perspectives on how the border regime is regarded, as the importance of boundaries hinges on the question of whether the other beyond the boundary is perceived as threatening or supportive. Communities in the border areas of Kyrgyzstan where the population is majority Uzbek on both sides seek an open regime. However, when different ethnic groups face each other across the border, the quest for strengthening defences grows, so that “we do not get trouble from them.” Thus, the significance of borders scales up and down depending on the perceptions of insecurity, while borders give an orientation that encourages a feeling of security.

The generation change and subsequent loss of common language work to increase the social gap between border communities. They have invested little themselves into preservation of inter-ethnic relations with their neighbours, viewing this as a domain for international tolerance-promotion projects. Social distances in the meantime have increased, as those born after 1985 presently enter adulthood, while the overarching Soviet identity and associated internationalist values move further away. There are fewer integrating mechanisms such as shared education, employment and Soviet army service. Deterioration of education facilities and standards, lack of structured employment, high rate of school dropout and limited social opportunities create conditions for disorderly behaviour. As young men and adolescent boys are the most frequent victims of cross-ethnic violence—both sides report beatings on the other’s territory—they are also the likely perpetrators. They are the first to be harassed by the police and border guards, to become frustrated, turn to aggression and take it on the other group.

Elders of the Soviet generation have limited control over young men, as the role models of young men have changed and they tend to listen to the authority figures closer in age, such as “sportsmen,” businessmen and crime bosses. Social control is often exercised by young people over the older generation and they are keener on standing for territorial integrity than their Sovietised fathers and grandfathers: ‘I will not give up a molecule of my land’.

Generation change affects traditional peacemaking, which is not popular anyhow despite the authorities pushing in that direction. As the Tajiks are more dependent on the other side, they typically initiate a local peace after incidents, sending delegations of mullahs, elders and municipal authorities. Such was the case at a reconciliation event in 2013 between Voruh and Samarkandek when the Tajik side was represented by aksakals (elders). The Kyrgyz side mostly brought young men, who did not possess the same culture of restraint, became emotional and scared their Tajik interlocutors. Local peace was not achieved.

Aggressive promotion of language policies and public pressure to speak state languages contribute to segregation. Young community members have few incentives to learn each other’s languages, whereas proficiency in Russian has declined. In the M-Vector survey, 32% respondents said that

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26 For example, 17 Kyrgyz families (108 persons) live in Tajik villages in Chorkuh municipality.
27 Interview with Deputy Premier Tokon Mamytov, Bishkek, August 2013.
28 Interview with Abdughifrorn, Gulkhana Jamoat, Bobojon Rasulov District, August 2013.
29 Bernd Kuzmits, Borders and Orders in Central Asia, 36.
30 Field research in Osh and Jalalabad oblasts, August 2013.
31 Bernd Kuzmits, Borders and Orders in Central Asia, 81.
32 Interview with youth leader Sulaimanhon, Isfara, August 2013.
they “understand a little” and 12.6% responded that they “do not know a single word” of Russian. At the same time, visual means have increased access to information via the Internet and have enhanced transparency and distribution speed, but also contributed to proliferation of false rumours. Video technology allows shooting fights and attacks to publicise evidence confirming one’s storyline and quickly make it accessible via mobile technology. Social sites, such as Facebook and Odnoklassniki, are actively used for uncensored coverage, prompting the Tajik government to ban Facebook altogether. Still, labour migrants abroad publicise video material of incidents that they receive from their home villages on social networking sites.

Livelihoods in coexistence and conflict

*We want to live in peace. But let’s not mix up the problem of drinking and irrigation water with high politics*33 is how a local resident summed up the prevailing sentiment. In reality, economic considerations drive in different directions, while “zero-sum” logic dominates the public mind, as illustrated by farming land disputes. Local conflicts over land broke up between Kok-Tash and Chorkuh in 2000, between the Langar community (Chorkuh) and Kok-Tash (Samarkandek) villagers in 2000 and 2001 over the Kara land plot. In 2003, an agreement was reached, which committed the parties to abstain from farming contested territories. This slowed down land cultivation, and as of 2016, the Kara plot still lay idle. The sides could have cultivated contested land by splitting it half-and-half temporarily, but prefer not to, as each believes that the border delimitation would be in their exclusive favour.

Inter-ethnic tensions typically start with some livelihood triggers that ignite them. Resource-sharing disputes revolve around two main issues—water and pastures (the other problems are farmland and woodcutting). Water can have multiple meanings, being, as Bichsel calls it, “a mobile, flexible and fugitive natural resource with an inherent uncertainty about its quantity and location.”34 Water conflicts can be about absolute shortages due to the economic decline, population growth and climate change. The Shurab–Voruh drinking water pipeline is a festering issue: although paper crack repairs are occasionally conducted, their scale is insufficient to resolve the problem. Bichsel identifies upstream—downstream geographic position as determining power relations in irrigation conflicts. They can be about resource allocation: more typical are the situations when the Kyrgyz live upstream and have better access to water while downstream Tajiks do not receive enough.

Conflicts can be about attempts to bring irrigation to the new territories. The recurring water conflict in Ak-Sai–Voruh revolves over the Tajik farmers’ efforts to expand cultivation area and attempts to deny irrigation water by the Kyrgyz community to prevent this expansion. Khoja-i Alo (Chorkuh) and neighbouring Kyrgyz villages use waters of the Matchoi Canal, and both sides blame each other for taking more than their fair share. Tajiks are convinced that the land around the canal belongs to them, while the Kyrgyz dispute this. Moreover, such conflicts are often exacerbated by historical memories of belonging of territories lost as a consequence of Soviet boundary redrawals.

Ageing infrastructure and poor maintenance add fuel to tensions, but technical solutions to water problems run against territorial claims and the ability of each side to use water as leverage during unrest. Two new water pipelines in Voruh and one in Chorkuh, which go through contested land, could not be built because Kyrgyz municipalities did not allow sections to traverse their territory.35 Voices are heard that no new installations based on interdependency should be constructed before delimitation takes place.

33 Interview with a community representative in Samarkandek, Kyrgyzstan, August 2013.
34 Bichsel, *Conflict Transformation*, 49.
35 Deputy Head of Chorkuh Municipality expressed that “I had been solving such problems for the last 12 years, but can do it no more,” August 2013.
Water and land are intertwined in the conflict microcosm as the Kyrgyz view the problem through the prism of Tajik expansion. Pastures are mostly located in Kyrgyzstan, and often Kyrgyz work as shepherds for Tajik livestock. When pastures were rented out to the Tajik side in the past, the leasers installed water supply and converted pastures to farmland. Hence the desire to restrict access to pastures nowadays. The Tajik view is that irrigated land cultivation is a better use of land than extensive cattle breeding and that they contribute more to the development of the region. Tajik citizens are charged a higher fee for pasture access and regard the demand to pay for the “God’s gift” as grossly unfair. In the past, kolkhozes received free allocations of grazing lands. Presently, each municipality has a right to set own prices for foreign nationals; this results in higher mark-ups than domestic user charge. Tajik communities regard this as rampant rent-seeking as pastures would lie idle if they were not used. They argue in response that “we do not charge the Kyrgyz different prices for a marshrutka ride—why should we pay more for pastures?”

Livestock theft is a chronic irritant. According to the Kyrgyz side, herding cattle through Voruh was problematic because 5%–10% of livestock was lost to thieves. In 2013, the situation got so bad that the Kyrgyz shepherds had to be accompanied by armed police to traverse through the area. Tajik authorities denied the claims and noted that livestock destroys the crops they cultivate and that 150 of their own livestock also disappeared.

Natural resources are vital as symbolic stakes and a century-long way of life, which includes keeping farm animals and cultivating land. However, the question is how much agriculture really matters for economic survival, and if threatened, does it present a big enough danger to foster violent conflict? Arable land is in short supply: there are 12,000 ha of irrigated land in Tajikistan’s Isfara district (4.5 ha for ploughing and 7.5 ha for horticulture) for 230,000 inhabitants. However, agriculture is not the sole revenue. The M-Vector survey found that only 24.7% respondents identified agriculture as their main income source. These data question the causal link between scarcity and violence.

Moreover, the efficiency of agriculture is uncertain. In Voruh, the disputed lands are located in the foothills, to which water would have to be pumped up by a motor. This requires energy supplies for the pumps to work and makes it expensive. Even in the prosperous Bobojon Gaffurov district, 80% of land is irrigated by pumps, for which an amount of 6.5 million TJS (Tajikistan Somoni) per year is required to cover electricity bills. The district head admitted that he doubted how efficient land cultivation based on pumping water uphill is, if the full cost of electricity, pump maintenance and staff salaries were added.

Uncertainty over borders halts development; isolation holds the region behind and dictates the need for better communications to break out of it, adding an infrastructural dimension to the quest for defined borders. The view from Kyrgyzstan is that with unsettled borders, there is no assurance of settled and stable relations. A moratorium on construction on contested lands is constantly subjected to pressures on the ground.

Many of the existing roads traverse the other’s territory, creating a sense of dependency and vulnerability. Local observers noted that the roads “became the reason for all our conflicts.” Communities feel empowered when they have the leverage of a road blockage in case tensions flare up. For example, in 2008, Tajikistan leased a section of the Batken–Leilek Highway to Kyrgyzstan under the agreement on temporary mutual land exchange of 18 May 2005. The Tajik community was dissatisfied as it lost a potential leverage to block the road. Dushanbe, they maintained, failed to take their interests into account. They were unhappy with the government for agreeing to a

36 As theft of livestock has not been reported to the police, these claims cannot be verified.
38 Khujand workshop record, 3 December 2014.
Kyrgyz road project via Samarkandek, which their neighbours sought to build to avoid traversing through Uzbekistan.39 Road closure proved an effective weapon. In 2013, Kyrgyz communities blocked a road, demanding construction of an Ak-Sai–Kok Tash bypass to avoid driving through the junction where village roads intersect and “interstate” traffic accidents are frequent. Instead of installing traffic lights, deputy premier Tokon Mamytov ordered the construction to appease his citizens. In response, the Tajik neighbours staged protests to obstruct it. Troops were brought in to secure the project and it went ahead.

Communities essentially regard interdependency as negative and temporary compromise, as not sustainable in future and a problem that should be solved. The prevailing view is that “if only we could be self-sufficient, this would improve our lives greatly.” This aspiration is hard to put into practice under the conditions of chessboard settlement patterns and the necessity to share resources. However, infrastructure is being built to break out the interdependence pattern—even if this is the least cost-effective solution. Developments that improve self-sufficiency are viewed as success, such as construction of a separate school in Jabbor Rasulov district (Tajikistan) which has an enclave in Leilek. As a result, Tajik children can attend school without crossing into Kyrgyzstan’s territory. The head of Jabbor Rasulov district commented that “separate roads are a requirement of any independent country.”40 Erection of independent water installations is under way: in Ak-Sai, the Kyrgyz side built a water pumping station to separate the supply from the Tajik neighbours.

Another driver is the so-called “creeping migration,” especially in the Arca–Kostakuz (renamed Khistavrez) area, which the Kyrgyz interpret as a Tajik Occupy movement. The term designates settlement onto scarcely populated lands by citizens of the neighbouring state. Reeves describes both a fear of cultural transformation and of “moving the border” by a hard-to-observe creep movement that eventually turns into “a threat to the very integrity of the state.”41 In the past, Kyrgyz individuals sold or leased their land to the Tajiks when they were not interested in it or moved away. The sales were semi-legal because Kyrgyzstan’s law prohibits sales of land and housing in the border areas to foreign nationals.42 However, the purchasers hold what they believe are valid contracts, as they paid a market price for them. They appeal to the district authorities to either keep their houses on the other side or receive compensation.43

Here we observe how territorial separation creates a mechanism of control through which identity is imposed upon constituents.44 After a series of incidents when in February 2016 border guards placed Kyrgyzstan’s flags over the houses of Tajik families in Kulunda area in Leilek district and deported several of them,45 Tajik settlers were offered an option to take up Kyrgyzstan’s citizenship and stay in their homes. For that, they had to bring a documented proof of renouncing their Tajikistani citizenship, which the local authorities were under covert orders not to issue. This is perhaps so because the land is contested: although the 1958 map indicates its belonging to Kyrgyzstan, earlier territorial designation shows otherwise. Thus, “my state is where my people are” is a notion that elevated a squatter dispute to a matter of territorial integrity.

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39 The road goes through the territories in Samarkandek municipality, which Tajiks consider as theirs, where the border is not yet defined. The road construction de facto puts these territories under the Kyrgyz jurisdiction. Some Tajik households had to be resettle as the highway was going through their houses. Resettlement was not without problems and getting compensation was difficult. The Tajik community was left dissatisfied, watching a Chinese construction company destroying “their” land (Author’s field research for Saferworld in 2009).

40 Interview with the Head of Jabbor Rasulov District, Tajikistan, September 2011.

41 Reeves, “Materialising state space,” 92.

42 The law was not yet adopted when most sales took place.

43 Kayumova interview.


At the same time, many connectors persist. Grey economy works towards preservation of the status quo. Opportunities in informal trade—reinforced by Kyrgyzstan’s accession to the EEU—necessitate porous borders and a degree of trust between the sides. Traders are often the first people to facilitate peace after incidents. Illegal trade opportunities allow avoiding customs duties and license fees. The scale of informal trade and illegal crossings shows a high degree of cooperation, while business and drug trafficking are said to cut across ethnic lines. It is believed that about one million dollars a year goes via Surkh alone. The main commodities are scrap metal from Central Asia going to China, fertiliser, mercury, re-export of cheap petrol supplied by Moscow to Kyrgyzstan and dried fruit from Tajikistan en route to Russia. Cross-border trade facilitation is a fashionable topic in international development but experiences a low demand in knowledge of the legal side of things.

Shepherds are also conduits of deals. As Chorkuh has no pastures of its own, Tajik farmers have to use Karavshin and Kashambish pastures in Kyrgyzstan. They have a choice to either pay the full pasture fee to a Kyrgyz municipality or to make informal deals with shepherds so they pretend that they herd Kyrgyz livestock. Shepherds are to resolve issues with border guards if they are detained with a wrong number of sheep on the way back. When they are unable to fulfill their promises, Tajik owners have few means of redress.

Securitisation as a security threat

Security dynamics deteriorated gradually, with little attention paid to it until a sudden surge in 2013. From January 2010 to February 2013, 62 security incidents took place at the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border. According to Kyrgyzstan’s Border Service, in 2012, 15 incidents took place on the Batken/Isfara border segment, but in the first 6 months of 2013, there were 50 incidents. In 10 months of 2014, 40 border incidents took place in Kyrgyzstan overall, 32 of them on the Tajik border (year-to-year two-fold increase) and only 5 with Uzbekistan. The scale and intensity of the 2013–2014 incidents were notably different, as well as the speed with which popular mobilisation occurred. New claims over oil deposits, bridges and roads, which did not feature before, have been put forward. Disputes flared up over the ownership of nine oil wells in Kyrgyzstan’s Leilek district. In June 2013, an oil and gas deposit, No. 205, which Tajikistan considered as theirs, was called into dispute after 22 years of post-independence exploitation. This surge coincided with advances in border delimitation when it approached Leilek. Overall, 35 infrastructure objects were claimed by Tajikistan. Year 2015 witnessed a return to the relative peace — ten incidents each took place on Kyrgyzstan’s borders with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan respectively.

The April 2013 violence between Voruh and Ak-Sai was a momentous event and is examined as a case study. It started with an attempt to build a bypass road. The road story carries a deep fear behind it, as roads are powerful sites for enacting territorial integrity. In areas where the formal border is not visibly demarcated, it is the road that serves as the de facto site of state territorial control, along which posts can be sited.
Although Voruh is an enclave on the map, in reality, its borders were open. Free movement took place most time, with nearby forests and foothills of Kyrgyzstan being accessible. The main external road went through the Kyrgyz territory, while the Kyrgyz had to traverse Voruh with their livestock to access the pastures beyond the enclave. Passage problems mounted, and in 2011, Kyrgyz municipalities complained to the then-President Otunbayeva about beatings of shepherds and theft of livestock herded through Voruh. The government allocated funding to build a bypass. The Kyrgyz side was confident that they were within their rights to do so: the new road was at a 500 m distance from the disputed borderline and did not contravene the ruling on construction moratorium within 200 m of it.

The Voruh Tajiks suspected a sinister motive behind the project, thinking that a state would not spend 30 million KGS (Kyrgyzstani Som) just for a cattle road. They perceived that the proposed bypass was to create a semicircle around Voruh, establishing a *de facto* border, along which Kyrgyz border guards could be stationed. The other semicircle is formed by rocks and high mountains. Thus, the road would entrap the Tajik community inside the enclave, reduce pasture access and enforce Kyrgyz border defences. The “under siege” sense prompted mobilisation against a collective threat.

The Kyrgyz official line was to provide unobstructed access, but the sentiment behind was different. A Batken administration official expressed that “we want independence. We want to close Voruh up the way we closed Sokh [enclave belonging to Uzbekistan] — by road and by rocks. We want to make a proper enclave out of them. But we need delimitation for that.”

As the construction began, Tajik villagers protested. The mass fight of 27 April 2013 resulted in injuries, hostage taking, road blocking and damage to construction company’s property. Attempts at talks ended in detention of two Tajik police officers by angry Kyrgyz community members, who tore off their shoulder straps, injured one policeman and seized their duty weapons. Kyrgyz border troops were present but did not interfere, although one officer fired warning shots in the air. Force was displayed later when officials got involved. Gulru Kayumova, Isfara deputy head, who arrived to resolve the standoff accompanied by three Voruh-stationed troops, was astonished to be met by a whole Kyrgyz squad.

The incident triggered a chain reaction when communities blocked roads elsewhere to support their kin. A tense standoff occurred between Ak-Tatyr and Khoja-i Alo. The Tajik authorities warned that their citizens intended to attack the Tamdyk/Bedak border post, in their view illegally installed, and they were powerless to prevent it. *Marsrutka* drivers — public transport has been operated by the Tajik side — avoided taking Kyrgyz-looking passengers because Tajik vigilante groups stopped vehicles and beat Kyrgyz men. Ramifications were felt throughout the year in the wider area as the sense of insecurity increased.

What changed the equilibrium by 2013 were the renewed attempts to establish the border and an expansion of security presence in the preceding years. Securitisation of the Kyrgyz–Tajik border took place in the decade 2003–2013, when troops equipped with modern weapons and uniforms started to be used against civilians herding sheep, cutting timber and smuggling consumer goods. Security became one of the primary factors forcing fortification and militarisation of borders.

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52 Interview, Batken oblast administration, Kyrgyzstan, August 2013.
53 The weapons were later returned.
54 “I went to Voruh with three borderguards and the head of jamoat to negotiate the crisis, while a whole squad came out from the Kyrgyz side,”—interview with Kayumova, Isfara, August 2013.
55 Dadabaev, “Securing Central Asian frontiers.”
while the disproportionate display of force that characterises Ferghana Valley frontiers carries an additional performative function symbolising expression of national sovereignty.

Securitisation emerged as a threat in its own right, with a culture of force projection, in which minor violations make civilians a “legitimate” target for shoot to kill. Use of firearms became common. Each year people (mostly Tajik) have been killed in border areas. While in the past, inter-community disputes were resolved by a combination of mediation and pressure from the authorities, presently the parties more readily turn to law enforcement structures for support. Disputes escalate more rapidly when border guards get involved. This has created an atmosphere of grievances, which adversely affects inter-communal relations.

Security incidents spiralled further securitisation. In response to the April 2013 clashes, the state reinforced the defences of Tajik municipalities. On 10th May, a police station was established in Voruh, which previously had one community policeman for 30,000 inhabitants: crime was low and the communities largely managed it themselves. A branch of the State Security Committee was set up. Voruh used to have only eight stationed border troops, but then reinforcements were sent to match the neighbour’s capabilities. The Kyrgyz side motivated their security deployment by demography: their citizens were outnumbered and vulnerable and thus in the need of protection by the state. It increased the militarisation of the Ak-Sai–Samarkandek area, with around 300 troops contributed by different agencies. A military contingent in Ak-Sai was reinforced with border troops and special forces, and squads were deployed along the Voruh–Samarkandek perimeter.

Tensions only increased and the outcomes did not take long, as armed hostilities erupted on 11 January 2014, when security and border structures subjected each other to mortar and grenade-launchers’ fire. Insecurity gripped the communities after the firefight, and men with local roots flocked to the area to support their kin. Kyrgyz and Tajik men organised night patrols, burning fires to signal their presence at the border. Civilians on the Kyrgyz side patrolled together with troops. Field visits to Samarkandek in February 2014 revealed that about 300 men went on patrols every night. Three-echelon defences were set up on the Tajik side, growing in strength as they got closer to the borderline at Khoja-i Alo, for which young men were specially selected. A detachment of former field commander Shoh Iskandarov was believed to appear in the area to man the defences and train Tajik men in combat techniques. Firearms became noticeable. Possession is legal in Kyrgyzstan as long as civilians have their rifles registered, but their overt display was unusual.

The situation de-escalated since its peak in 2014, perhaps aided by a realisation that a dangerous threshold was approaching and sliding into war was in nobody’s interests. The Ukraine crisis served as a warning example. Inter-communal relations calmed down, but the actions of the security structures continue to serve as a source of grievances. They, for one, interfere with economic activities and agricultural practices, which ought to be the responsibility of local authorities. In March 2013, a protocol on non-interference of border guards in economic activity was signed in response to Tajik concerns that troops count sheep returning from Kyrgyz pastures, but realities changed little.

Border deployments obstruct freedom of movement and break established patterns. When agreements on removal of unilaterally placed posts, such as those along Bedak–Tamdyk, were reached, they were not implemented. The Tajik side maintained that it did not introduce new


58 Interview with Tokon Mamytov, Bishkek, August 2013.
border posts, and those erected were in retaliation to the neighbour’s actions. In Maksat (Leilek, Kyrgyzstan), school access was at stake. A secondary school was located at International village, and Kyrgyz children had to go through a Tajik checkpoint to reach it, where they were reportedly harassed. The Kyrgyz authorities decided to build a separate bridge to get around it. A local expert observed that “if the checkpoint were removed, there would be no need to build the bridge and waste money.”

Community life does not feature in the military picture, which portrays the border as almost sacrosanct. A new Kyrgyz border watch tower was erected directly above a garden of a Tajik Chorkuh family, from where the soldiers observe their every move. This was interpreted as an insult, as Tajik cultural sensitivity renders family life strictly private.

Border guards often act on the contested territories as if the border was established, the population was aware of it and they had a right for control of a defined territory. Kyrgyz guards have been involved in several violent incidents with Tajik civilians, who believed they were on their territory, while the Kyrgyz soldiers thought otherwise. Some such incidents have resulted in fatalities: this is how 18-year-old Boborizo Rizoyev, a Tajik from Chorkuh, lost his life on 6 July 2015. Detention of trespassing civilians and arguments with Khoja-i Alo residents resulted in protests, such as hampering road access through Kyrgyz territory to Voruh. Civilians have been detained by masked gunmen — pointing machineguns at them — who demanded passports on entrance to Ak-Sai and checked documents of residents at random.

Border enforcement is unpredictable. In most cases, the border guards are not permanently stationed but operate mobile patrols and catch unlucky violators. Sometimes, they set up ambushes, e.g. on market days, when locals take their produce to sell on the other side. Often an issue can be resolved by talking oneself out of a situation or paying a small bribe, but the same situations may end up with severe repercussions. Tajik police noted that when standoffs happen, they are faced by Kyrgyz border troops rather than by the local police, with whom their relations are generally good. Kyrgyz, in turn, maintain that their border guards face Tajik Interior Ministry troops and riot police rather than local cops. In the end, it is unclear which agency should deal with cross-border incidents—police, army special forces or border guards? Is it an inter-village brawl and a police matter, or an interstate conflict and border troops’ responsibility?

A surge in patriotism has led to the recognition of the governments by the border population as the nation’s protectors. The latter gained political capital out of the 2013–2014 events as they solidified with popular will and showed force. Importantly, the crisis improved Dushanbe’s political standing in Isfara, where the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party used to be strong. When protests occur, the troops mostly solidarise with the actions of their ethnic kin even when they are not above board and are reluctant to act against them. Although police cooperates in other areas, prosecution for violence against civilians from the neighbouring state is an opaque subject, even when criminal investigations take place. The June 2010 events in Kyrgyzstan contributed to a culture of impunity for young men, and the lack of prosecutions for cross-border incidents led to the approach being replicated on the Tajik side.

Local residents, in their turn, support their troops and provide them with food and fuel. The security sector became appreciated as a protective arm of the state: “It is important that the state exists, that it can protect you at a critical moment” (Tajik respondent). However, this does not go far enough: “if only laws denying them rights to our resources were implemented and our security structures enforced them, many problems would be solved” (Kyrgyz respondent). Relations between communities and troops are fairly close. Villagers help with maintenance: in Tajikistan, dehkan (farmer) enterprises make up for the deficient state funds by providing supplies for servicemen. One interviewed community-based organisation rendered, as they put, “humanitarian
aid” of 700 kg of beetroot to border guards in Bobojon Gaffurov district. In Ak-Sai, servicemen were deployed in private homes due to shortages of barracks and got embedded into community life. However, border structures are vulnerable to direct action. One reason for their deployment in large numbers is that in the past, civilians had seized weapons from troops and police when they outnumbered them.

Communities have emerged as actors in their own right and are not easily tamed by the state. Khoja-i Alo became the lead activist on the Tajik side, and 1,700 people reportedly signed a petition to the President, protesting against the construction of the Ak-Sai–Tamdyk road in 2013. The petition was also forwarded to international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development and the Asian Development Bank, who were believed to finance the road. Kyrgyz communities went further and, in May 2014, detained high-level officials such as the Deputy Prime Minister Abdurahman Mambetaliev and Deputy Interior Minister Kursan Asanov, from whom they demanded better protection from their Tajik nemesis. Although tensions have de-escalated since, the community power hardly diminished: e.g. in 2016, it was not clear whether local villagers or the state was behind the continuation of the road closure in Samarkandek.

Hence, a paradox has emerged: communities seek more security, which an established border should supply, and at the same time, as Kuzmits observes, “the history of transnational and translocal interrelations has not rendered the border as a frontier on the local populations’ mental maps.” Borders have not been internalised and are widely viewed as contradicting common sense. In the words of a Kyrgyz border commander Saitjan Eratov, “Tajiks graze their livestock on our lands as they used to do, but we are obliged to erect barriers. People ought to feel the border, but they do not do it yet—and thus die.” (Таджики как пасли скот на нашей территории, так и продолжают это делать, а мы же обязаны ставить заслоны. Люди должны чувствовать границы, но пока не чувствуют—and therefore they die).

It is hard to change without changing anything, but we will try

If the attempts to introduce a border security regime ran into many painful obstacles as demonstrated herein, the question is of the real need for it. Here, considerations of higher state order come into the picture. They concern security, such as combating drug trafficking, terrorism and transnational criminality, and economy including collection of customs duties and transit fees at the borders, as well as preventing smuggling. Geopolitics of state sovereignty and new statehood drive towards marking the territory as one’s own, whereas defined borders serve as an expression of that sovereignty. At the same time, it can be argued that randomly, but brutally patrolled borders, which in large measure are de facto open, poorly meet these aims. Better results might be achieved by less obstructive means lenient on local populations, such as through improved security cooperation or by filling customs declarations at source.

The history of official ties dates back to January 1993 when the Protocol establishing diplomatic relations between the two states was signed. The main documents regulating interstate relations are the Dushanbe Treaty on the Interstate Relations between the Republic of Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic of 12 July 1996 and the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations and Partnership of 26 May 2004, while 88 legal agreements were concluded altogether. Still, high-level visits have

62 Interview with Temurmalik Rustamov, Kostakuz Jamoat Development Committee, 2011.
63 Indeed, 50–60 border troops reside in private homes in Kok-Tash and one emerged from the garden as we were passing through the village, August 2013.
64 Discussions at the Khujand Workshop, March 2016.
65 Bernd Kuzmits, Borders and Orders in Central Asia, 338.
66 Ekaterina Ivashenko, “Чья это вода, чья земля... Как живется в спорных приграничных районах Кыргызстана” [Whose water, whose land is this... How people live in disputed border districts of Kyrgyzstan], 22 August 2012, http://www.fergananews.com/articles/7458.
67 The website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Tajikistan.
been infrequent: Imomali Rahmon travelled to Kyrgyzstan only thrice on a bilateral basis, and the presidents mostly meet at multilateral regional summits, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and other international fora. The Kyrgyz Prime Minister Sooronbai Jeenbekov visited Tajikistan in May 2016, but the expected documents were not signed reportedly due to disagreements over border issues.\textsuperscript{68}

The Almaty Declaration (December 1991) and the June 1992 CIS Charter form the legal basis for post-USSR border settlement, the progress of which has been slow. The Intergovernmental Delimitation and Demarcation (Parity) Commission was established to address these issues and its protocols provide for the legal regulations of border relations. The landmark 2008 Joint Statement by the presidents Bakiev and Rahmon serves as a guide to addressing practical issues in lieu of a pending bilateral border treaty, \textit{inter alia} stipulating a moratorium on economic activity on the contested lands.\textsuperscript{69} An important bilateral agreement on pasture lease is pending since 2008, leaving Tajik farmers with no state-guaranteed provisions for grazing animals on the other side.\textsuperscript{70}

Dushanbe is interested in cooperation with Bishkek as its least problematic neighbour, especially in the light of unpromising relations with Uzbekistan. In 2010, President Rahmon declared Kyrgyzstan a “friend and relative” of the Tajik nation. Institutional cooperation mechanisms have been developed, such as between migration services, state registrars, water utilities boards and law enforcement. An Interstate Coordination Council was set up and Security Councils hold regular meetings. The Batken and Soghd oblast administrations established thematic working groups and, in 2011, an action plan between the two was adopted. However, negotiations over pasture fees delayed signing of the 2013–2017 cooperation agreement.\textsuperscript{71} More recently, cooperation on the oblast and district levels became more problematic because “state strengthening” encouraged the drive towards bureaucratic centralisation, with an implication that minor border incidents, such as livestock theft, have to be dealt through diplomatic channels involving ministries of foreign affairs instead of bordering municipal authorities. Tajikistan’s government system is highly centralised, with compulsory approval by the central bodies of local agreements, and therefore is very slow.

Efforts to agree on the borderline have been ongoing since 1999. However, negotiations have moved little in substance since 2002, as the two sides dispute which maps should form the legal ground: Dushanbe appeals to priority and duration arguments, whereas Bishkek to \textit{de facto} settlement at the end of the USSR. Various zigzags to change the Commission’s composition and status, e.g. have it chaired by deputy premiers or involve community representatives, and the exploration of Moscow archives has achieved little. Former president Roza Otunbayeva, in her account, recalled that President Rahmon was reluctant to even discuss the border settlement.\textsuperscript{72} According to the Soghd oblast administration, the Parity Commission solved the problems in Ovchi-Kalacha in 2011, but the field visit revealed that this was not the case.\textsuperscript{73} In 2012, the Commission met 12 times but made no progress on any point.\textsuperscript{74} In August 2013, one problem area in Ganchi (Jabbor Rasulov district) was delimited. Bishkek subsequently suggested resorting to a third-party mediation, but Dushanbe declined.\textsuperscript{75}

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\textsuperscript{68} Asia Plus, 12 May 2016. \\
\textsuperscript{69} The Tajik side altered its terminology: It is now “against non-agreed construction” on disputed lands. \\
\textsuperscript{70} "Кыргызстан ждет от Таджикистана варианты по расценкам и количеству скота" [Kyrgyzstan is waiting for Tajikistan’s proposals for pricing and the amount of livestock], Avesta News Agency, 11 May 2015, http://avesta.tj/2015/05/11/kyrgyzstan-zhdet-ot-tadzhikstana-varianty-po-ratsenkam-i-kolichestvu-skota/. \\
\textsuperscript{71} It was finally signed in November 2014 and reported by 24.kg News Agency, http://24.kg/tsentralnaja_azija/1209_mejdu_batkenkskoy_oblastyu_kr_i_sogdyskoy_oblastyu_rt_podpisan_memorandum_o_sotrudnichestve/. \\
\textsuperscript{72} Otunbayeva in interview to Radio Azzatyk, 6 April 2016, http://rus.azattyk.org/content/article/27657867.html. \\
\textsuperscript{73} Author’s field research in September 2011. \\
\textsuperscript{74} A Commission member’s interview, August 2013. \\
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An impetus for change came upon Bishkek’s suggestion in 2016 to swap some lands in Isfara/Batken area, such as those around Voruh, for lands surrounding the beginnings of the Tort-Kul Canal. This could have paved the way for further land swaps and options for resettlement. However, as the idea was leaked in the press, the Tajik border communities expressed their opposition. The Tajik authorities backtracked, apprehensive of stirring public passions.

What makes the situation especially interesting is that the border communities can show the state the limitations of its power. This is because the authorities essentially share the patriotic feelings of their compatriots living at the borders, and only a sense of public duty urges them to exercise restraint.

Isfara is one of the few places in Tajikistan where the officials actively seek community cooperation rather than resort to command methods. So far, the Soghd administration had faith in their ability to control their population: “so far our communities are manageable.” Still, my interviews with community representatives on both sides indicate that they regard their own authorities as ineffective, cautious, unwilling to stand up for their land, slow to react to grievances and quick to make concessions. Border populations demand a more assertive policy towards the neighbour.

Why the society hated the authorities? Because they constantly tell us that all problems should be resolved peacefully. “This is a road of life. Close your eyes on how they behave.”

Security discourses are increasingly directed at each other and accounts of oneself — as of threatened states. The governments have turned their attention to improving conditions in the border territories to enhance their citizens’ stake in them and entrench their presence as a “collective border guard.” Otunbayeva’s presidency sealed the link between border and security, and Bishkek was the first to invest into segregation. A law on the Status and Development of Border Territories was adopted in July 2011, aimed at “strengthening national security guarantees, territorial integrity and impermeability of state border.” It stipulated tax concessions and other benefits for the population. Social and economic development plan for 55 Batken settlements was approved. Following the same pattern, Tajikistan allocated subsidies from the central budget to Isfara when it was headed by Rahmonali Amirov and invested into social infrastructure in border municipalities, with a focus on young people, such as building new stadiums.

From the national interest perspective, Tajikistan’s hand is constrained because of Kyrgyzstan’s capacity to inflict unilateral damage, if it chooses to do so. This was demonstrated after the January 2014 shoot out, which triggered a border closure by Bishkek and contributed to the neighbour’s isolation. Bishkek gained a leverage, after which Dushanbe quickly agreed on the construction of the Voruh bypass, and solutions were found for separate Ak-Sai–Tamdyk and Kulundu–Maksat roads in exchange for border opening. However, this leverage existed as long as Tajik-Uzbek relations remained poor, but situation has changed following the death of the first president of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov. Tashkent indicated its willingness to restore positive interaction; the move which was met in Dushanbe with great hope. If the relations indeed improve, Tajikistan’s hand will be strengthened and it may be able to restore transit via Uzbekistan’s route. The significance of Kyrgyzstan would scale down, and Dushanbe’s negotiation position would be tougher and more assertive, if it gets alternative options.

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76 Communication to author by Bahrom Faizullaev, Khujand-based analyst, January 2016.
77 Interview with Jumabay Sanginov, Deputy Head of Soghd oblast administration, Khujand, August 2013.
78 Abdalali Sharipov, Chorkuh, interview, August 2013.
79 In May 2011, President Otunbaeva visited the construction site of the Aksai–Tamdyk–Chuurgan Baba Highway. The Kyrgyz border communities’ demands for visiting President Otunbayeva were to (1) build a separate road, (2) bring the border commander Bakhtiyor Mamyrov back, and (3) stop petrol sales to the Tajik side. She stated that “relations between the citizens of neighbouring countries have become so strained that it was decided to build a bypassing road around Tajik territories. The residents of Batken district should feel that they are citizens of the Sovereign Republic of Kyrgyzstan, rather than being simply residents of a bordering region with complex problems.”—3 May 2011, AKIpress, http://fergana.kipress.org/news:125431/cited in JDC Voruh report, June 2011, 43.
81 Juraev also notes the expert views that Tajikistan’s bargaining power may increase if negotiations last longer.
Enclaves remain the most intricate issue. Altogether, there are about 70 enclaves in the Ferghana Valley divided among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and five of them are sizeable. From the onset, preservation of the enclaves appeared unsustainable, but they became a fact of life, while the states invested resources, manpower and political capital into their continuous existence. Although the enclaves act as smouldering sparks and have already led to violence in 2013 in Sokh (Uzbekistan) and Voruh, the states are unwilling to give the territories up, as considerations of national pride got entrenched while regional relations worsened. Making territorial concessions does not fit into this logic.

The international politics of securitisation has contributed to materialisation of boundaries in new ways\(^2\) and has produced far-reaching political consequences. Inadvertently, assistance programmes have facilitated border and security deployments without a clear rationale. In 2003, the European Union (EU) — under the Austrian presidency — initiated a multiyear Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) programme\(^3\) aimed at strengthening borders inside Central Asia. The programme was the exact opposite of the EU’s philosophy of open borders and free movement. Moreover, it too readily assumed that the borders existed, while in reality many were undefined.

International involvement influenced the authorities’ determination to go ahead with formal borders, rationalising this by security considerations. However, international programmes contributed little to stopping crime, drugs and illegal migration, as patchy and poorly policed borders hardly act as an impediment for drug traffickers and organised crime. Weapons are being seized in borderlands: in 2014, Kyrgyzstani security structures apprehended one aviation bomb, Mukha light anti-tank rocket and two unguided missiles, apparently obsolete Soviet-era armaments,\(^4\) but it is unclear whether the physical border plays any role in this.

BOMCA and a similar US Export Control and Related Border Security (EXBS) programme were seen by the governments at the time as gigantic moneybags that promised expensive equipment and assistance with checkpoint construction. The states only had to create them to be able to receive the benefits. Building of checkpoints unrolled where none existed and border protection strategies got adopted. At times, international agencies were at loggerheads as both sought to assist the same checkpoints, such as on the Kyrgyz–Tajik border in 2004.

Eventually, most of the international border assistance to Tajikistan became concentrated on the Afghan frontier, and its northern border was receiving less attention. The situation was the opposite in Kyrgyzstan, where Batken oblast bordering Tajikistan and Uzbekistan was prioritised. This difference transpires in the contrast between the Kyrgyz Kyzylbel checkpoint constructed with international funds and the impoverished Tajik Guliston where border staff reportedly supported themselves by breeding rabbits. In 2013, BOMCA assisted Batken with border patrol towers with EXBS funding and procured night vision and day surveillance equipment for its border guards, as well as 20 bicycles for cycle patrols.\(^5\) Tajikistan’s Soghd oblast got next to nothing, as it was not prioritised within the country. Unsurprisingly, Tajik border communities were resentful of what they perceived as preferential international treatment of the Kyrgyz.

BOMCA contributed to border-crossing facilities but was ineffective in curbing bulk drug transit\(^6\) and several checkpoints later became effectively redundant. Some were closed by Uzbekistan to citizens of the neighbouring states. Field observation at Patar checkpoint on the Uzbek–Tajik border in Konibodom showed that five people crossed in seven hours. The programme promoted

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\(^5\) Information from UNDP BOMCA Kyrgyzstan manager, author’s interview, Bishkek, August 2013.

joint management at the Kazakh–Kyrgyz Ak Jol border crossing, but the two sides fell back on separate controls until Kyrgyzstan’s EEU accession abolished customs altogether.

What does the future bear?

As the governments are unwilling to pressurise their communities too hard into a difficult compromise, the default option is to maintain the status quo. International conflict mitigation programmes, interpreted by Bichsel as “hegemonic” and treating a non-existent illness, have contributed to the maintenance of the status quo, albeit without proclaiming their aim as such. Status quo appears as the least bad option, but it experiences challenges, such as new security deployments, proliferation of checkpoints as revenue-generating opportunities at crossings, building of new infrastructure and attempts at cultivation of contested lands. Status quo management requires the commitment of both parties and cannot function if one gets determined to establish the border, while the other prefers a grey zone. It needs constant maintenance of peace in the absence of a solution, including local officials’ dialogue and trust between them, exercise of restraint by border guards, developmental measures, ongoing international monitoring and political engagement of the capitals. Weakening of some of these components can slide the border region into new violence.

Ultimately, the states will have to decide which functions they want their borders to carry. In Kuzmits’s terminology, this could be military, with hard security deployments; economic, meant to generate revenue through customs duties; policing, intended to combat transnational threats such as drugs and terrorism; or identity, by drawing nationhood lines. A future strategic choice appears to be between a solution based on open borders, joint jurisdiction of the densely populated territories and preservation of common economic and social spaces, or by establishment of a closed border regime modelled on Uzbekistan. The former would require goodwill and imagination of the governments, while the latter will demand a greater degree of repression than the states are inclined to.

Rather than encourage the “strong fences make good neighbours” thinking, we need a creative approach of shared sovereignty in order to transform seemingly intractable territorial disputes into sustainable peace. The joint jurisdiction of two states over the Isfara/Batken area can bring significant gains in human security. This will require a special status for the territory, from which checkpoints would be withdrawn to the outside perimeter. The parties would commit themselves to deploy only police with non-lethal weapons and abstain from sending troops unless in a national emergency. Joint police patrols would combat illicit woodcutting and livestock theft.

Considerable political will of the leaderships is required to put a joint jurisdiction solution into practice, alter the constitutions and harmonise legislations. In that way, everyday social and economic activity can proceed unimpeded and community interaction would be preserved. The presently disputed lands will be cultivated either split in equal measure or used on the basis of individual lease contracts. Harmonisation of land codes, laws regulating property ownership and inheritance, and use of pastures will need to follow, so that contracts are valid on both sides. Medical facilities would be open for local residents irrespective of citizenship. Schools can be supervised by the respective ministries of education, with compulsory classes in each other’s languages.

Presently, high-minded statehood considerations, influenced by the notion that the state ought to be “strong,” prevent low-key practical solutions, while pressures on the ground are mounting. The

88 Bernd Kuzmits, Borders and Orders, 83.
alternative option is for the two presidents to use their power to order a border division that may go through settlements but would present a viable defence line, along which border installations can be erected. The Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan border was drawn in such a scenario in 2002–2004 and many ethnic Uzbeks chose to resettle to their kin state.

This scenario is fantastic in the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan context. Unwillingness to settle the border by a concerted use of force is telling about the nature of political systems. However authoritarian Tajikistan might be in other respects, the regime is not confident in its ability to control the population in the case of mass border protests. It is apprehensive of the popular reaction and sensitive to the expression of dissent when it comes to border issues. The political order in Kyrgyzstan relies on popular legitimacy and is averse to imposing solutions against the will of the Kyrgyz majority. Kyrgyz politicians drew a lesson on how border concessions can backfire from the events in Aksy in 2002 when six people died in a dispute sparked by the transfer of a piece of unpopulated territory to China.

As the two states were locked in their border dilemma, EEU expansion was a new factor in this complicated context. In 2014, a mission of Russian security officials that came to the south of Kyrgyzstan to assess the border situation was confident in their ability to tackle it: “We can do anything. We are not traffic police” (Мы все можем. Мы же не ГАИ).\(^{90}\) Interviews with local observers in south Kyrgyzstan in 2014–2015 indicate that communities also had high expectations that Moscow will look after their interests acting as an ultimate arbiter to rectify the excesses of local powerholders. “When people start talking about Russia, it is as if they have a third eye opening” (когда люди говорят о России, у них как будто третий глаз открывается).\(^{91}\) This feeling is reinforced by TV coverage: “we are being told through TV that our lives would be easier. Otherwise our politicians cannot be trusted” (через телевизор нам объясняют, что нам будет легче жить. А то нашим политикам нельзя верить).\(^{92}\)

The communities in Tajikistan also looked at the EEU as a problem solver. In their logic, if both states joined the Union, the need for division would be redundant, and Moscow can arbitrate the disputes more fairly.\(^{93}\) The precedent was set by General Borduja of Collective Security Treaty Organization in 2014, who facilitated negotiations on the forces’ withdrawal deployed during the January crisis and an agreement on joint patrols, thus contributing to de-escalation. Overall, the idea of joining the EEU has been popular. According to the Sharq 2014 survey, 82.4% Tajikistanis approved of it, 12% were undecided and 4.8% opposed. Those with negative attitude included representatives of the ruling elite, bankers and nationalist intellectuals.\(^{94}\)

After Kyrgyzstan joined in 2015, Tajikistan has been in negotiation with Moscow over a possible entry. Alexei Malashenko of Moscow Carnegie Center believed that Dushanbe was pressurised into doing so.\(^{95}\) The potential benefits were free movement for Tajikistan’s main export — its labour force — and Russian investment. Diminished profits in trade and investment from China have been a counter-incentive, while the latter promotes its “One Belt, One Road” geo-economic project.

The view of the expert community close to the Russian establishment has been different: Moscow, affected by an enlargement fear similar to the EU, has started to acquire second thoughts over admitting Tajikistan, at least in a short-term perspective.\(^{96}\) The Union appears unwilling to share

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90 Osh, June 2015, in remarks to the author.
91 Munoz Tashbayeva interview, Osh, June 2015.
92 Community focus group, Kyzyl-Kiya, March 2015.
93 Golib Urnun interview, December 2014.
the burden of spatial experiments as the new states find their physical and metaphorical shapes and is unlikely to become a game changer as far as the Kyrgyz–Tajik border is concerned.

**Conclusion**

While interstate confrontation is by no means imminent, tensions around enclaves and contested territories are likely to persist in future. Although the issues on the ground are not new, more people participate in incidents, and the events at the border acquire a wider national resonance. Given the capacity of border communities to mobilise quickly in the case of perceived threat, a danger that seemingly small disputes may get out of hand is real. The mechanisms of coping with the risks — community resilience, state capacities and conflict management structures in the wider Eurasian region — are insufficient. Left unaddressed, cross-border problems are capable of leading to disturbances, serious security incidents and international ramifications.

The wider Eurasian context is still shaping and the exercise of new sovereignty in its borderland incarnation is a part of this evolving picture. While the separation drive has affected the whole of Central Asia, the smaller and weaker states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are unprepared to pay a considerable price for it in terms of domestic politics and also materially by erecting border installations. Establishment of a security regime on the Kyrgyz–Tajik border has run into problems as it was confronted by a microcosm of local relations, chessboard settlement patterns and interdependencies, and exacerbated tensions.

After 25 years of independence, two trends are challenging the status quo of tense coexistence on undefined territories. One is the emergence of borderland identities with strong ethnic and “nation’s protector” connotations, reinforced by generation change and the new statehood ideologies. The other is a precarious feeling of collective insecurity even at the time of relative tranquility, with awareness that disruption may be around the corner. “Divided we rise” mood dominates.

None of this helps to resolve the border dilemma. Abandoning a hard border regime and “zero-sum” delimitation efforts can be the best way out of the fragile situation, but there are no precedents for it in the Eurasian context, and its political culture is not conducive to it. Therefore, the borderlands would continue with their “in flux” existence until either a crisis of some magnitude forces resolution or a new generation of politicians would accept that delimitation efforts have run into an impasse and seek different ways to satisfy their security as well as economic and geopolitical interests.

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**Declaration of interest**

Anna Matveeva declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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