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Transformation of the problem to use water resources from transboundary rivers in Central Asia in 2017-2023

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After the collapse of the USSR, the coordinated management of water resources has become one of the main problems for the countries of Central Asia. Water is of paramount importance in the region, determining the future direction of its development. Much of the region consists of arid desert and semi-desert areas what further complicates the situation. Over the past decades, the countries of Central Asia have tried to take steps for constructive resolving water issues, but so far no concrete results have been achieved. However, water supply issues and the quality of fresh water currently play such an important role in the life of these countries that neglect of them can lead to destabilization of the socio-economic and political situation in the region.

The lack of water resources in transboundary rivers, especially for irrigation of agricultural land, and the growing threat of melting glaciers in the Tien Shan and Pamirs significantly aggravated the contradictions between the countries located both in the lower and upper reaches of these rivers. This gradually led to increasing tension in the relations between states in Central Asia. For example, the well-known tragedy of the Aral Sea is the result of complex factors and long-term processes, in which both natural and anthropogenic factors were involved. In the 20-30s of the 20th century, after starting the construction of irrigation systems, significant changes were made to the ecosystem of the region. The construction of large canals to irrigate cotton and rice crops in Central Asia led to large losses of water and a disaster in the Aral Sea. This caused conflicts and tension in the region, which ultimately led to the disappearance of a major water resource.

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In recent years, some changes have taken place that, on the one hand, provide a real chance to coordinate the positions of the countries in the region on the issue of water resources and to create the real mechanisms for their joint use, and on the other hand, they can completely change the relations system that has developed around the use of transboundary river resources. These transformations occurred after a number of political changes in the countries of Central Asia. In 2016, after the death of Islam Karimov, Shavkat Mirziyoyev became the President of Uzbekistan, in 2019, after the resignation of Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan was headed by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, in 2020, after the political crisis and the overthrow of the President of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbai Jeenbekov, Sadyr Japarov became the President, and in 2021, after the withdrawal of American troops and the collapse of President Ashraf Ghani, the movement «Taliban»¹ led by Haibatullah Akhundzada came to power. These political changes have largely transformed the situation around the problem of transboundary rivers in Central Asia.

Under these conditions, two major trends can be noted. **Firstly, after Sh. Mirziyoyev came to the post of President of Uzbekistan in 2016, significant changes occurred in the approach to resolving issues related to water resources and energy in the region.** His administration changed its foreign policy strategy, began to actively improve relations with neighboring countries and reduce the potential for conflict in Central Asia. Already in 2017, during the official visit of the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev to Kyrgyzstan, important statements were made regarding cooperation in the field of hydropower. He announced the possibility for joint construction of hydroelectric power stations, which demonstrated Uzbekistan's willingness to seek compromises on the issue of transboundary water resources. These statements were further confirmed in subsequent events. In 2018, at the meeting of the heads of countries of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), Sh. Mirziyoyev expressed the initiative to create the Regional Program for the rational use of water resources in Central Asia and to declare the Aral Sea region a zone of environmental innovation and technology. His initiative also included the creation of the Regional Center for Growing Seedlings desert and forage plants, the creation of transboundary protected natural areas in the Aral Sea region, as well as conducting joint interdisciplinary research in the field of sustainable development of the Aral Sea region and organizing a regional conference on these issues in Uzbekistan.

The greatest progress in resolving issues of the use of transboundary water resources was achieved between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In 2021, the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic signed and ratified the Agreement on certain sections of the state border, the Agreement on joint management of water resources of the Andijan (Kempir-Abad) reservoir, the Agreement on mutual supplies of electricity for the period 2021-2023, which aims to ensure additional influx of water from the Toktogul reservoir and prevent a shortage of water resources during the growing season in the middle and lower reaches of the Syrdarya River. Under these agreements, Uzbekistan is to supply excess electricity to Kyrgyzstan when it is necessary. In exchange for this, Uzbekistan is to

¹ Recognized as a terrorist organization in Russia by the decision of the Supreme Court on February 14, 2003.

receive back part of this electricity in the summer from Kyrgyz hydroelectric power plants. This collaboration will allow efficient management of resources, meeting both energy needs and maintaining sufficient water supply to important agricultural areas in Uzbekistan.

Significant progress was achieved during numerous visits of the President of Kyrgyzstan S. Japarov to Kazakhstan and the President of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev to Kyrgyzstan in 2021-2023, during which a number of agreements were signed. The parties agreed to jointly solve such urgent problems as the common use of transboundary water resources and eliminating traffic jams from cargo trucks at the border, which constantly becomes the subject of disputes between the countries. However, another crisis with restrictions for Kyrgyz trucks on the border of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in August-September 2023 in response to the cessation of water supplies from the Kirov reservoir on the Talas River to the Zhambyl region of Kazakhstan showed that, in conditions of low water, there is still a long way to go before the situation is fully resolved. However, it can be noted that there has been a certain improvement in relations between the countries of the Syrdarya River basin (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

Secondly, the situation around the use of water resources of the Amu Darya River remains difficult, and after Afghanistan began the construction of the Kosh-Tepa irrigation canal in the north of the country in March 2022, the issue of water use rules arose with renewed vigor. Water for the Kosh-Tepa canal is diverted from the Amu Darya River, about 90 km north of the city of Mazar-i-Sharif on the border with Tajikistan. The commissioning of the Kosh-tepa canal in Afghanistan can radically change the water regime and balance in Central Asia. This was stated on September 15, 2023 by the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev at the summit of the leaders of the founding states of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea in Dushanbe. He noted that a new participant in the water use process has appeared in the region, which is not bound by any obligations.

The Kush-Tepa canal project was developed back in 2018-2021 by the previous government of Afghanistan with support from USAID. According to the project, the length of the water pipeline is to be 285 km, width — 100 m. According to the developers, the canal is to irrigate agricultural lands in the provinces of Balkh, Jawzjan and Faryab and should provide jobs for a quarter of a million people. The project cost of the canal construction is \$684 million. The construction of the canal involves 6.5 thousand workers and more than 3 thousand pieces of equipment. The first section of the canal, 108 km long, had been completed and filled with water by October 2023. At the moment, builders have already begun the construction of the second section of Kush-Tepa, 177 km long. It is expected that this part of the canal will be built in three years, then the builders will build a system of small canals to individual farmlands. Final completion of the work is scheduled for 2028.

Experts are confident that the construction of the canal will worsen the shortage of water resources in the region. Firstly, it is known that the canal is being built to take approximately 10 billion cubic meters of water from the Amu Darya per year. The average annual volume of the river flow

is about 70-80 billion cubic meters. Moreover, in recent low-water years, the total volume of Amu Darya flow was 35-40 billion cubic meters, that is, the river can lose from 15 to 25% of its flow. The risks are very high, since for the fourth year in a row the lower reaches of the Amu Darya are experiencing an acute water shortage. Over the years, water shortages have been caused by a variety of factors: weather conditions (little snowy winter, low precipitation and high air temperatures), uneven water intake between the upper and lower reaches, ineffective water use management, including forecasting river flow volumes, etc. The situation with the deficit either improved or reached extreme levels, but overall remained difficult.

Secondly, primitive technologies are used during the construction. The banks and bed of the canal are not concreted or compacted; loose and sandy soil will lead to significant water losses (up to 40%) due to seepage. In addition, primitive technologies and the lack of comprehensive environmental monitoring will lead to water pollution from agricultural, industrial and household waste. Thirdly, the project is considered by the Taliban government as a priority, important in terms of the country's image. The project is being implemented in the north of the country in the provinces where mainly representatives of ethnic minorities (Uzbeks, Tajiks) live, so the project demonstrates the center's attention to their problems and sets the goal of increasing their loyalty. Considering the high political importance of the Kosh-Tepa canal construction project, the Afghan side does not incline to compromise with other countries in the Amu Darya River basin.

Traditionally, water allocation between the five CIS countries is based on quotas established in the 1980s within the USSR. At the same time, Afghanistan has long remained aloof from water disputes. There was a civil war in the country; there was no a single, generally recognized government that would deal with water management issues. Since the 1990s. and until the 2020s, Afghanistan used only about 2 billion cubic meters per year. Moreover, there are no legal mechanisms for resolving water issues with Kabul. Afghanistan is not a member of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of the Countries of Central Asia (ICWC), within which the countries of the region determine quotas for water withdrawal from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya. In addition, Kabul did not accede to key documents: it did not sign either regional agreements or the UN Water Convention. However, Kabul believes that it has a full right to Amu Darya water in accordance with international standards, and the previously agreed distribution of water does not satisfy the interests of all parties.

Neighboring countries have not yet decided on their attitude to what is happening. In Turkmenistan, there is no comment on the Kosh-Tepa project at all. In the summer of 2022 and spring of 2023, Uzbekistan sent the Deputy Secretary of the Security Council under the President of Uzbekistan, Special Representative for Foreign Affairs Abdulaziz Kamilov to Afghanistan. During these negotiations, special attention was paid to issues of cooperation in the water and energy sector, but no agreements were reached. Another Uzbek government delegation is to visit Afghanistan before the end of 2023 to hold negotiations on the Kosh-Tepa canal being built from the Amu Darya. This

was announced by the khokim of the Surkhandarya region Ulugbek Kosimov, who is also to be in the delegation. Khokim noted that although the canal is being built from the border with Tajikistan, and not with Uzbekistan, it will have an impact on all countries in the Amu Darya basin.

Thus, two oppositely directed trends have emerged. On the one hand, in 2017-2023 among the “old” participants a tendency towards a coordination of interests appeared, primarily due to a change in the position of Uzbekistan. On the other hand, the start of the Kosh-Tepa canal construction in northern Afghanistan in 2022 has radically changed the water regime and balance in Central Asia and has led to the emergence of a new player in the process of resource distribution of trans-boundary rivers, whose existence can no longer be ignored.