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Reconsidering the meaning of neighbourship: the transformation of Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border areas after 2016

The year of 2016 was marked by a breakthrough in interstate relations between Uzbekistan and its neighbors; relations that were previously frozen and marked by sporadic hostile confrontations, thawed and shifted to multilateral cooperation. Territorial disputes in the Ferghana Valley have created tensions between Tashkent and Bishkek. Border areas were largely militarized during the 2005-2016 period of political confrontation leading to the rupturing of economic and social relations that had been fundamental to the cohesion of border communities. The intergovernmental commission had not formally negotiated since 2009, but negotiations resumed after 2016.

From 2005 to 2010, border crossings between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were very limited because of border disputes. In 2010, the border was closed by Uzbekistan after political upheaval

KEY MESSAGES:

- Large-scale changes in infrastructure occurred in the border area of Uzbekistan, including the destruction of dozens of households and their subsequent relocation to areas deep within Uzbekistan and the erection of a military border fence at the site of settlements. Places where natural resources could be shared, such as village pastures and water intake structures, became inaccessible to border residents because these sites reside in the 'neutral zone'. This significantly reduced revenue sources for cross-border farmers.
- The transborder canal management system at the inter-district and interregional level proved to be extremely vulnerable to the political cooling of

and inter-ethnic conflict in Osh and Jalal-Abad in Kyrgyzstan. In 2016, the new Uzbekistan president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, declared the country open to regional cooperation, including opening borders for human mobility and trade. Between September 2018 and February 2019, MSRI conducted research into the dynamics that occurred in border areas following Uzbekistan's opening of the border. This policy brief presents an analysis of case studies conducted in the villages of Kara-Suu district, Osh region, Kyrgyzstan, and Qurgontepa district, Andijon region, Uzbekistan. The aim of this brief is to analyze how the new political climate has affected these border communities and to ascertain promising areas for restoring inter-community cooperation.

The dynamics of bilateral cooperation

Long-term negotiations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan around border areas received political support after the exchange of official visits of the heads of state in 2016 and 2017. As a result, in 2017, the two countries reached an agreement on 1170 of the 1378 km of common border (Asanov, 2017). Slightly more than 200 km of the border remains disputed, including natural and built resources important for both countries: Ungar-Too mountain, Orto-Tokoi (Kasansai) reservoir, and agricultural land around the Sokh exclave.

A landmark memorandum was signed in 2017, which established the Council of the Heads of Border Regions. This Council received the authority to resolve issues at the local level. The Council included heads of local authorities, governors and heads of districts, and heads of law enforcement agencies. The Council received high status level because it was chaired by the prime ministers of both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This was a very important step, since local issues had previously to be coordinated through the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the two countries, and the time costs and bureaucracy of that process had strongly influenced the way problems of border communities had been resolved.

What has changed for local residents after the border opening?

After 2016, six of the previously operating 17 border checkpoints were opened, including two that serve the residents of the Shakhimardan exclave. Overall, following the opening of these checkpoints, the flow of people between both countries increased dramatically. While 3 million people crossed the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2017, in 2018 this

relations between the two countries. Personal ties with employees of water organizations, and, to a lesser extent, institutional obligations, prevented the cross-border canal management system from completely breaking down. During 2005-2016 the transborder canal management system was able to adapt by using informal tools, and relations at lower levels among water management organizations continued to operate and ensured that previous agreements were honored even in a situation of national political uncertainty.

- Restrictions on the movement of goods, services, and people across the border have provoked a massive outflow from both sides to labor migration. This is a particularly important conclusion of the study, since poverty and redundancy of labor are considered to be the main sources of outward labor migration in Central Asia. However, our data show that problems of economic stagnation in border areas, provoked by the policy of militarization of borders, is a catalyst for migration of border farmers.

number reached 9.3 million (Latipov, 2018). However, many checkpoints important for local economies of border areas, such as Kyzyl-Kiya highway, Yntymak highway, Seydikum highway, Bek-Abad highway, Kara-Suu highway and Kensai highway checkpoints, remained closed.

Social ties between communities living in border areas have resumed, however, the process of crossing the border is complicated due to the heavy flow of people and the insufficient number of open checkpoints. In November 2018, we conducted a flash survey at Dostuk checkpoint in Osh among 57 citizens on both sides. The main focus of the survey was to understand how much time it took to cross the border. Thirteen people answered that it took them more than three hours; 32 people replied that it took them more than five hours, and 12 people said more than seven hours. Such long transit times create a stressful environment, especially for elderly people and children.

Case study of adaptation practices in transformative border context: Savay, Yntymak, Kadyrsha, Kyzyl-Shark, Ken-Say villages and Kara-Suu city (Kyrgyzstan), Karasuu, Sultanobod urban-type settlements (Uzbekistan). Large-scale transformations occurred in these transboundary areas during the period of border closure between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Kara-Suu market, the largest market in the southern Kyrgyzstan, which specializes in re-exporting Chinese goods from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan, experienced

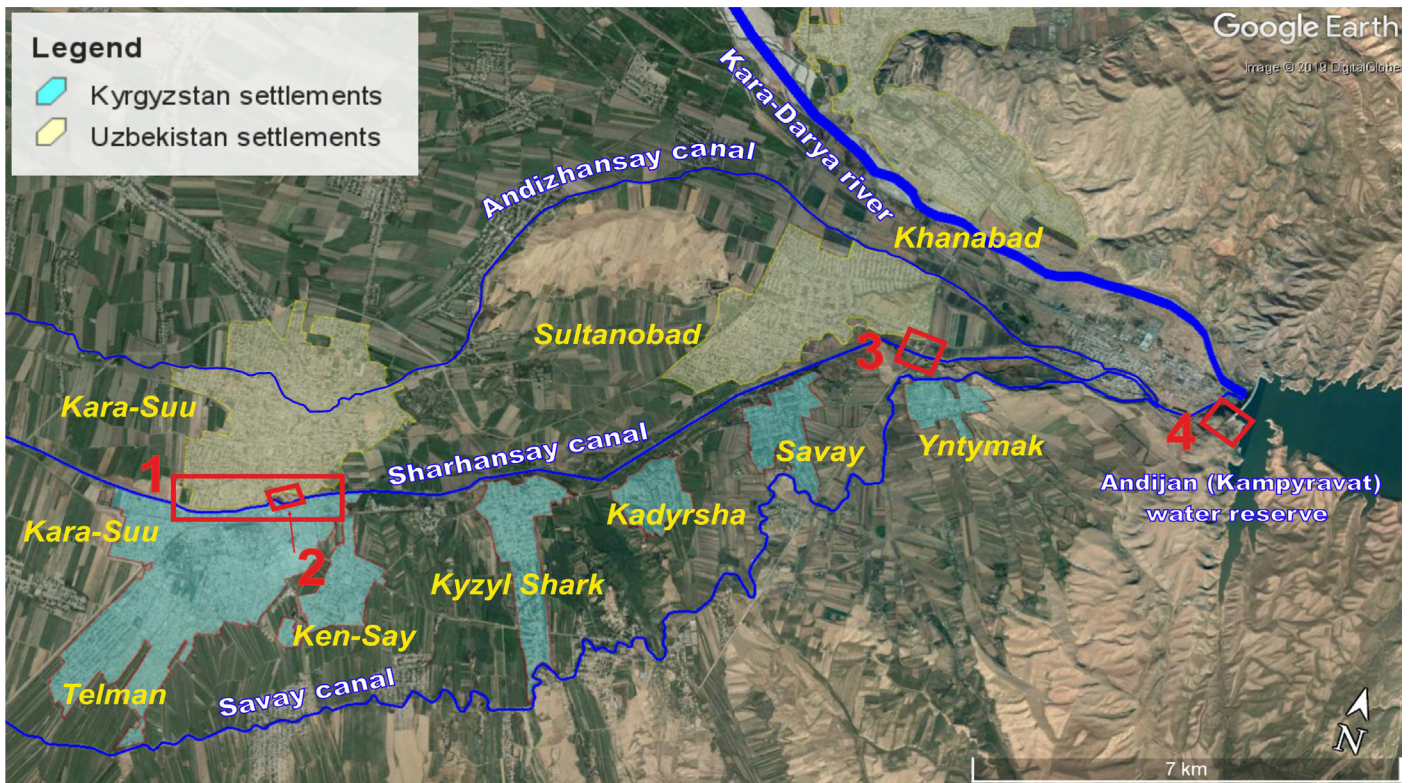


Figure 1: Ayil aimak Savay villages: Savay, Yntymak, Kadyrsha, Kyzyl-Shark and Kara-Suu city borders on the urban-type settlement of Karasuu and Sultanobod (Uzbekistan).

a collapse in sales. Activities associated with the market, such as transportation, catering, and trade, all dramatically declined, and the market infrastructure deteriorated significantly.

Infrastructure changes during the period of border closure:

In the city of Karasuu (Uzbekistan), large-scale demolition of residential buildings was conducted along the border (square 1 in Figure 1). Two checkpoints that served as the main transit points for goods from the Karasuu market remain closed (square 2 in Figure 1) and local residents currently travel to the Dostyk checkpoint in the Osh city to cross the border. The cross-border infrastructure, including the local border market, bridge, and road, were no longer used (square 3), and the access point to water for shepherds from Savay remained closed (square 4).

Water issues:

Water management institutions came under intense pressure due to the closure of borders, because the materialization of the border prevented Uzbekistani specialists from monitoring the Savay cross-border canal (data from the interviews with water management organizations, November, 2018). At the same time, the villages of Ayil aimak Savay experienced problems with rising groundwater due to the lack of bank protection works undertaken on the canal. The two countries barely shared any data on water consumption, and the fragile atmosphere of

trust at the level of border communities made it difficult to maintain cooperation during political and conflict events in 2005 (i.e., Andijon events in Uzbekistan and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan), 2010 (inter-ethnic conflict in Osh and Jalal-Abad, in Kyrgyzstan), and in 2015-2016 (conflict on the radio line station on Ungar-Too mountain). Specialists from both countries, who had previous experience working together, maintained a minimum level of cooperation since political tensions rose during these periods.

Dialogues among water organizations of the district and region levels partially resumed after the border openings in 2016; coordination was managed through the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, despite the 2017 Memorandum. It was important to resume this level of full cooperation and to delegate water cooperation issues to the local level, since agriculture is a leading source of income for the local population.

In 2016, Ayil aimak Savay initiated the connection of Savay to the Karasuu-Andijon water supply line administered by the Andijon water department. At the district level, an agreement was reached to construct an additional piping line to supply water to a number of villages of Savay in Kyrgyzstan. Charges for this drinking water are based on meter readings in Uzbekistan.

Rural economy:

The opening of the border inflicted losses on border farmers in Kyrgyzstan, because of the devaluation

of the Uzbek Sum and the ongoing policy of economic liberalisation in Uzbekistan. Products from Kyrgyzstan became comparatively more expensive than those of their counterparts in Uzbekistan. The old economic ties along the border have not recovered. Concurrently, new economic ties are being formed with difficulty due to Uzbekistan's ongoing protectionist policy towards its national market, as well as Kyrgyzstan's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which now denotes the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border as the border of the Eurasian Economic Union.

The emergence of barrage military infrastructure and the militarization of the borders have led to the rupture of complementary economic ties between border communities and to an outflow of farmers through labor migration. According to the words of the heads of border villages interviewed in this study, the main source of investment in rural infrastructure (constructing gravel roads, repairing canals, street lighting) is through labor migrants remittances. Before the border closures in 2010, local taxes from the activities of the Kara-Suu market accounted for the majority of the revenue of Savay's budget and were a financial source for investment in rural development.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE STAKEHOLDERS (GOVERNMENTS, LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT, AND DONORS):

- Stimulate and strengthen the dialogues amongst water management organizations and all interested actors at district and regional levels by lobbying for water issues to be included in a meaningful way on the agenda of the Council of Heads of Border Regions;
- Complement transboundary dialogues with expansion of mobility (trade) dialogues and the opening of additional checkpoints;
- In the contexts of limited cross-border trade, it is important to maintain agricultural income for economic development of border communities, paying special attention to employment of youth and income-generating projects;
- Establish and maintain an exchange platform not only for official dialogues, but also for informal exchange and sharing of experiences and best practices such as those gained at the Small River Basin Councils established recently in cross border areas in the Fergana valley

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Note:

The figures of the border areas were constructed based on open data from GoogleMaps. Currently, the border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan is undergoing delimitation and demarcation, and MSRI is not responsible for inaccuracies.

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https://www.ucentralasia.org/Research/MSRI_Publications/EN

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