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GLOBAL ENERGY TODAY: THE ASIAN NEXUS

By Scott Radnitz, Associate Professor at the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies



Oleg Storozhenko Kurpsai Hydroelectric Station

Article 2

CENTRAL ASIA: ENERGY IN CENTRAL ASIA IS A BLESSING AND A CURSE

Central Asia is blessed with abundant energy resources, but cursed with governments that manage them badly. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are among the world's leading producers of oil and natural gas, and Uzbekistan is not far behind in gas. Meanwhile Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which are mountainous, have abundant water from melting snowpack, which they can use to produce hydroelectric power. They also control the rivers that irrigate the (mostly cotton) crops in neighboring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Ideally, this would be a great arrangement: the upstream countries (where the rivers begin) supply water, while the downstream countries (where the rivers end) sell them oil and gas in exchange. But

the problem is politics: these countries' leaders do not get along. For example, Uzbekistan has cut off the gas supply to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the middle of winter claiming that it has not been paid what it is owed. It has also worked to impede Tajikistan from building a new hydroelectric plant that would allow Tajikistan to produce its own electricity but possibly decrease the flow of water into Uzbekistan.

Meanwhile, as they squabble, all the Central Asian states are at risk of drought and desertification as a result of climate change. Water use in the region is wasteful and inefficient,

especially in agriculture, a legacy from Soviet days. The Amu Darya River, dividing Uzbekistan-Tajikistan in the north from Turkmenistan-Afghanistan in the south, is used to irrigate the fields of the region, but has been depleted from overuse. This has resulted in the drying up of the Aral Sea and destruction of the livelihoods of people who live near it. Experts expect that as temperatures increase, glaciers that provide Central Asia's water will melt more rapidly, rainfall will decrease, heat waves will intensify, and there will be more severe water shortages. This will have a serious negative impact on farmers and cities, possibly forcing millions of people to migrate in search of work or places they can raise crops.

This is where governments come in. A long-term strategy would involve mitigation plans, meaning ways to adapt to a changing climate. This might include restructuring the agricultural system or implementing policies that encourage conservation.

But as in low-income countries everywhere, people are more interested in development—growing as fast as possible—than in sustainable growth. It is hard to persuade people to give up something now so that other people can have better lives in the future.

Governments in the region are also unlikely to force people to sacrifice to mitigate the effects of climate change. They are not democratic, and usually not popular, so they tend to focus more on stability in the present rather than investment for the future. And the safest bet to preserve stability is to continue existing policies rather than push for radical changes. And the current system is profitable to the people in power. This accounts for the paradox of Central Asia: The region has lots of resources, but continues to have high poverty and inequality, along with serious environmental problems.

Meanwhile, the location of the energy-rich Central Asian countries has made them an object of international competition. One country in particular—China—is thirsty for energy as it grows and provides for 1.4 billion people. In the last decade, China has made deals with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to buy their oil and gas, and has built pipelines to transport it. Some American companies have also invested in developing these resources. This would appear to be beneficial for everyone involved, except for the fact that pipelines used to run only to Russia, when Central Asia was part of the Soviet Union. Russia has been unhappy with the state of affairs since the Soviet Union collapsed and resents when other countries enter the region. Some people predicted that this could cause a war between great powers, but fortunately, there is enough oil and gas to go around, and the Central Asian states have remained close to Russia in other ways. So profit can go along with peace, at least for now.