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BEYOND WATER POLITICS: THE KEMPIR-ABAD RESERVOIR CONFLICT AND THE COMPLEXITY OF REGIONAL RELATIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Introduction

Conflicts over natural resources are rarely limited to the resources themselves. Water conflicts, for one, typically expose greater political, historical, and social issues that go beyond simply geographical or infrastructure issues. Water is no longer just a fluid element in Central Asia: it has become tied up with the concepts of sovereignty, identity and interstate relations, where rivers and reservoirs still play a vital role in agriculture, energy generation, and regional security.

This complexity is especially clear in the conflict around the Kempir-Abad Reservoir (in Uzbekistan, the Andijan Reservoir). The reservoir is situated at the border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and has developed into one of the most politically charged transboundary conflicts in the region, formerly a joint **Soviet infrastructure project.**

The reservoir was built as part of an integrated irrigation and hydropower project in Soviet era, and borders were not given much political weight in the Soviet administrative system. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, however, administrative areas became international borders. Once politically unified infrastructure now exists under a variety of states, each with their own agenda.

This shift in paradigm had a dramatic impact on what it meant to share water systems. The reservoir was no longer just an economic or environmental asset but was linked to territory, national security, national memory, and regional power.

The matter escalated in 2022, when Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed an agreement on the border about transferring control of the reservoir to the country of Uzbekistan in exchange for other lands. The deal was offered in an elegant and diplomatic manner as a step forward in bilateral relations, but at the same time it provoked public criticism and protests in Kyrgyzstan. The decision marked for many citizens not compromise, but the loss of territory, and diminished sovereignty.

Thus, the Kempir-Abad case illustrates that there is no political explanation for modern resource conflicts. They rather come out of strategic competition, environmental pressure, institutional development and collective identity. By reflecting on the war from several IR lenses, the reasons behind the sensitivity of the conflict politically and its significance regionally can be understood.Looking at the conflict from several lenses in IR helps to understand why the conflict is politically sensitive and regionally significant.

Realism and Strategic Competition

One of the most important theories of interstate rivalry for shared resources is realism. Realist theory states that the international system is anarchic, all that is to say that there is no higher power to ensure the security of the states. Under such a scenario, a state's focus is on survival, territorial integrity, and national interest.

As a realist, the Kempir-Abad Reservoir is not just a source of water, but a strategic asset as well. The irrigation system is crucial for agricultural production in the Andijan region, which is one of the

most economically developed and populated regions in Uzbekistan. Water access is thus directly related to economic security and domestic security.

Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, holds a significant strategic upstream position, with its actions shaping the region's water dynamics, even with limited economic and military strength. Geography is therefore the basis of strategic influence.

Another aspect of realism is that of an unequal distribution of power between the two states. As for population, economic and military power, Uzbekistan is much more significant than Kyrgyzstan. These benefits enhance its negotiating leverage during negotiations and, give it more influence in the region.

Meanwhile, the conflict shows how weaker states can have leverage in areas that are geopolitically or environmentally important. The ‘asymmetric interdependence' in Kyrgyzstan involves the fact that both countries rely on common water resources, although not on an equal basis.

Realism is reflected in the 2022 agreement. Both governments responded in terms of interest of the nation and not idealistic cooperation. Uzbekistan won a strategic asset, Kyrgyzstan looked for territorial gains and better relations.

The development of Green Theory and Environmental Insecurity.

Strategic explanations are relevant but the reservoir conflict can only be comprehended in part when ecological realities are taken into account. Green Theory is a paradigm change from the politics of the state to the environment systems themselves.

The Syr Darya basin is a network of ecological systems that are connected and cross the boundaries of countries, glaciers, rivers, communities and farms. States are divided politically but environmental systems do not recognize the political boundaries.

Climate change has put additional stress on this fragile system. Long lasting water supply in Central Asia is at risk due to increased temperatures and glacier melt. Insecurity in the environment also directly affects political insecurity as water scarcity grows.

According to Green Theory, environmental degradation negatively affects stability because states go to war over decreasing resources. The Kenyan turbulent conflict between the two communities – the Kipsigis and the Abledis – is an example of this regional fear.

Importantly, ecological issues must be solved in concert. The environmental situation is structurally linked between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and they are not able to control the water system in the region themselves. The stability over the long term depends thus on cooperative resource management, not on single control.

Green Theory also stresses on environmental justice and community involvement. Many residents around the reservoir voiced discontent over politics without any significant public participation. This exclusion further hurt the trust and escalated the public frustration, especially among the Kyrgyz people.

The struggle thus shows that governance of the environment is not just a technical management struggle, it is also a struggle around issues of legitimacy, transparency and social inclusion.

Constructivism, on the other hand, provides an alternative view of the role of politics in terms of identity, historical memory, and common narrative.

The split and the distrustful attitudes between the two countries, combined with heavily controlled borders and unresolved tensions over the collapse of the Soviet Union had been affecting their bilateral relations for decades. Water issues eventually moved beyond the realm of actual conflict and into symbolic representation of other issues of sovereignty and nationhood.

However, things have changed considerably since the accession to power of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Uzbekistan in 2016. His government began a new and distinctive regional discourse based on co-operation, dialogue, and good-neighborly relations.

This change is significant from a constructivist view because state interests are not static, but rather are constructed as identities and politics shift over time. Political space grew to negotiate the regional role of Uzbekistan from a position of defensive isolationism to a position of cooperative engagement.

Diplomatic talks on the borders and mutual resources came to a head as the diplomatic rhetoric eased. The agreements about the reservoir were not made because the situation of the materials changed so much, but because the politics and regional storylines shifted.

Constructivism thus emphasises that interstate cooperation is not only based on calculation but also on trust and discourse, as well as identity formation.

Liberalism and Institutional Cooperation

Liberal interpretations add to the understanding of how institutional co-operation can decrease conflict even among states with competing interests.

The Republic of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have joined in several regional bodies on water and border management since their independence. Through institutions and agreements, channels for communication, information sharing and negotiation are established, which helps to diminish uncertainty between States.

The fact that the Kempir-Abad agreement has been reached in a manner that is possible through institutional arrangements despite the political tensions shows that compromise is still possible through institutions. Preventing escalation through joint management structures, border commissions and technical cooperation.

The other aspect of liberalism is also about interdependences. Both countries rely on good relations in the region and a good water system for economic growth. Cooperation is strategically advantageous, since it would incur costs on both sides in the event of conflict.While the cure to political mistrust lies with the people, institutions provide means for resolving political conflicts in a more predictable manner.

Conclusion

The Kempir-Abad Reservoir conflict reflects the broader complexity of contemporary interstate relations in Central Asia. The issue is not just about technical matters related to borders and water usage, but is also inextricably linked to the issue of strategic rivalry, environmental threats, institutional partnership and national identity.

Realism is the explanation of the value of power, geography and national interest. Green Theory emphasises ecological fragility and ecological relationship. Constructivism shows how political narratives and identities influence cooperation, whereas Liberalism highlights the importance of institutions and regional dialogue in stabilizing.

Combined, these viewpoints suggest that beyond the technical agreements, there is a need for trust-building, environmental sustainability and a collective management of shared vulnerabilities to foster cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in the future.

The reservoir is ultimately a contested resource. It represents one of the main issues confronting Central Asia as a whole: how states in the region can coexist in a sovereign and secure manner while cultivating cooperation in a region that is increasingly interdependent and environmentally vulnerable.

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