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## The Problem of Transboundary Water Resources in China-Kazakhstan Relations

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**Abstract:**

*The urgency of the problem under study is conditioned by modern international political realities: in a short time, China has become one of the world leaders with huge foreign policy ambitions, and Kazakhstan is one of the leading states of Central Asia with a great resource and geopolitical potential.*

*The purpose of the article is to consider the issue of common water resources of China and Kazakhstan as the factor of instability in relations between these two countries. The leading approach to the study of this problem is systemic one. The article presents the analysis of joint water use issue concerning the rivers Ili and Irtysh, examines the Chinese and Kazakh positions in this area, the threats that entail the delay of transboundary river problem solution.*

*The materials of the article can be useful for a wide range of researchers for the writing of works in the field of history, oriental studies, international relations and diplomatic centers of Kazakhstan, China and Russia.*

**Keywords:** Republic of Kazakhstan, People's Republic of China, Central Asia, Water Resources, Transboundary Rivers.

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## **1. Introduction**

Water resources play an extremely important role in the modern world. In the conditions of population growth and scarcity of water supplies, mankind faces the problem of planet water resources rational use. A complex international situation leaves its imprint on this issue. Nowadays the provision by water resources is not only the internal affairs of each state separately, but also the issue of international relations and world politics. The problem of transboundary water resources joint exploitation affects more than a hundred of countries (Sidorova, 2008), which indicates the seriousness and the importance of this issue. At least 148 river basins are shared by two countries, and 52 are divided between three or more states (Shalgymbaeva, 2009). The term transboundary water resources and transboundary rivers has appeared relatively recently, but is used in international practice, literature and the media more and more frequently. Transboundary water resources include any underground or surface waters that cross borders between several states or are located within the boundaries of several states (Attila *et al.*, 2015).

The principle of transboundary water resources issue is underestimated sometimes. At first glance it seems that we talk only about common rivers and water bodies, which are not so important against the threats of political stability, economic crises and military threats. But, in fact, the scarcity of water resources leads to colossal political and environmental consequences in the country itself, and also makes a threat to the sovereignty of the country. Conflict situations in the use of water resources can be imposed on interethnic, territorial and social-cultural problems, and their joint potential can lead to disastrous consequences (Starr, 1999).

China and Kazakhstan unite 23 transboundary rivers (Kaiyrbaeva, 2012). The most acute issue is the joint use of two major rivers, the Ili and the Irtysh. Both countries are facing water shortages, but the need for water is conditioned by various reasons (this is primarily economic projects for China). All this significantly complicates the situation in the issue of cooperation within the field of joint water use, and also creates tension in bilateral relations as a whole.

## **2. Research Methodology**

During the writing of the article, a set of scientific methodological principles and ideas were used, the most important of them are the following ones: the principle of historicism, the comparative-historical method and the system approach. The principle of historicism allows us to consider the problem holistically and in the dynamics of its development. Comparative-historical method makes it possible to identify the main trends within the problem. The system approach allows you to study all the components of the issue in a comprehensive manner. Thus, the problem of transboundary water resources in this article concerning the relations between China and Kazakhstan is considered as multilaterally and fully as possible, and also by taking into account the positions of these states.

For Kazakhstan and China, the issue of water supply is generally one of the most problematic ones. The deficiency of fresh water is the most acute environmental problem hampering the development of Kazakhstan (Pukhnyarskaya, 2013). In terms of water supply, the country occupies one of the last places in the CIS. Thus, 637 settlements (primarily the North-Kazakhstan, Akmola and Kyzylorda regions) experience the lack of drinking water quality, they are forced to content themselves with water that does not meet the generally accepted standards, with the salinity level above 1.5 g/l. The problem is complicated by the fact that the water deficit increases constantly. According to the Water Resources Committee of the Kazakhstan Ministry of Agriculture the country water resources have decreased by 20 billion m<sup>3</sup> over the past fifty years and further reduction is anticipated in the future. 40% of the water comes from to the republic from outside (China and Russian Federation) (Mamontov, 2012). This greatly exacerbates the situation, since this fact is a potential opportunity for the external influence on Kazakhstan. The leadership of the country is very concerned about these factors.

There is also the shortage of water resources in China. China occupies only 121st place in the world in terms of water volume per capita. There is also an extremely uneven distribution of fresh water bodies on the territory. The North accounts for only 19% of water resources, although it is more than half of the country in terms of the area (Zhang, 2008). The situation is further exacerbated by China rapid economic growth. The leadership of the PRC has high hopes for the development of the western regions of the country (Yermukanov, 2005) rich in oil, as this will benefit the economy and will reduce the tensions in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR). But in order to achieve their goals, the authorities need to provide desert areas with water first of all, which is supposed to be done using the transboundary rivers originating in China, and then flowing into Kazakhstan and Russia.

PRC has developed special plans, including the so-called "project 635", which refers to the Irtysh River for the "Great development of the West". In accordance with it large-scale construction works have begun on the building of the Irtysh-Karamay drainage canal (the canal was put into operation in 2000) since the late 1990-ies, and dams and hydraulic structures are being built. The increase of water intake on the territory of China will lead to catastrophic consequences on the territory of Kazakhstan and Russia (Omsk region is in the zone of danger, some desertification is observed, which threatens a serious ecological catastrophe). Large-scale projects have been developed for other rivers, including Ili. It is planned to build several dozens of hydroelectric power stations, dams, reservoirs, etc. By 2050, according to expert estimates, the amount of Ily flow on the territory of Kazakhstan will decrease by 40% (Isimov, 2013), and this river feeds the Kazakhstan Lake Balkhash (75% of water inflow into the lake).

### **3. Results and Discussion**

Thus, the problem of transboundary rivers is very acute in the context of China-Kazakhstan interstate relations. However, it should be noted that the concern here is clearly unilateral one, i.e. this is the problem of Kazakhstan. Problematic transboundary rivers originate on its territory, so this issue does not represent a particular danger to itself. It is significant that all suggestions on the solution of the problem are initiated by the Kazakh side. The issue was raised in 1992 for the first time, immediately after the establishment of diplomatic contacts between China and Kazakhstan. The leadership of Kazakhstan sent the draft agreement to the Chinese side "The proposals on the agreement of transboundary river joint use".

The Chinese side explains this by the fact that at first it underestimated the criticality of the situation Kazakhstan faced in the sphere of water supply. Only by the end of the 1990-ies the leadership of the People's Republic of China finally began to pay attention to the Kazakhstan initiatives on the settlement of transboundary river issue. Although it is quite possible that further ignoring of the problem could spoil the developed Chinese-Kazakhstan interstate relations, which was extremely unprofitable for Beijing. The projects on the joint use of Ili and Irtysh were regularly offered by Kazakhstan, but even acknowledging the existence of the problem, Beijing did not hurry to give certain answers. Chinese diplomats said evasively that "the issue is being studied", constantly delaying the negotiations for an indefinite period (Jamalov, 2011).

The issue of transboundary water resources is complex in international and regional aspects, since there are no documents or provisions in international law that prohibit or restrict the use of water resources by a country within the territory of its state, even if the boundary is common with other states. All issues in the field of water use are decided exclusively at the level of mutual agreements. Moreover, China ignores the signing of international agreements in the field of water resources, including the Convention on the right of the non-navigational uses of international watercourses and the Convention on the protection and the use of transboundary watercourses and international lakes, as this imposes certain restrictions that are not beneficial to Beijing.

In order to develop its western regions, China needs to maximize the use of water resources. The so-called "project 635" involves large-scale works in the territory of XUAR, which borders with Kazakhstan. All activities within the project require the increase of water intake from the Irtysh. The Chinese authorities plan to take water in the amount of about 5 cubic kilometers per year, which is 50% of the total flow of the Irtysh. According to the forecasts of the Kazakh side, even a 30% intake of the total flow can lead to a serious ecological catastrophe on the territory of Kazakhstan, as well as in Russian Federation. Beijing construction projects on the Ili River also require a significant increase in water consumption. Thus, by 2050, in the opinion of Kazakhstan researchers, the flow of Ili in Kazakhstan will be reduced by 40%. The agricultural needs of China require an equal provision with water resources. Beijing intends to make the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region the main producer of

cotton, and, as is known, this crop requires a large amount of water for growth. The areas of cotton fields, as well as wheat fields are constantly growing in XUAR, which requires the increase in the intake of water from the local most full-flowing rivers, namely, Ili and Irtysh. The commissioning of oil refineries will also entail the pollution of water resources. The Chinese authorities turn a blind eye to environmental standards and norms, the economic benefits from the projects are placed above environmental security. Thus, Kazakhstan will face not only the deficit of fresh water, but also a serious deterioration of its quality. The situation seems very difficult in the political, economic and environmental aspects for the future.

It should be noted that Kazakhstan intended to solve this issue jointly with Russia from the very beginning, since this is a common problem of the three countries, but China was against it, insisting only on a bilateral format (Jamalov, 2012). This policy is very typical for modern Chinese authorities - to translate the resolution of any issues into an individual order, so to decrease the influence of a third party that can veto the variant which is profitable for China only. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that China has not signed the main international acts on this topic: Helsinki rules on the uses of the waters of international rivers (1967), the UN Convention on the non-navigational use of international watercourses (1997), the Convention on the protection and the use of transboundary watercourses and international lakes (1992). Only in 1999 real bilateral consultations began on the issue of transboundary rivers between Kazakhstan and China. This was already a certain diplomatic achievement. The Chinese side assured that it would not allow the neighbor's interests to be infringed. A joint China-Kazakhstan commission on the use and the protection of transboundary rivers was established for the negotiations on a permanent basis. Two sides signed the first joint document in 2001 - the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Government of the People's Republic of China on cooperation in the use and the protection of transboundary rivers.

The leadership of Kazakhstan positively assessed the very fact of the negotiations and the agreements reached (Idrisov, 1999). The fact of official negotiation beginning on the issue of transboundary rivers and the signing of the Agreement is undoubtedly a significant event in the bilateral relations and the shift towards the solution of a long-standing problem. Within the implementation of the agreements, the following documents were signed: "About Emergency Notification of the Parties on Natural Disasters in Transboundary Rivers" (July 4, 2005), "On the Development of Research Cooperation in Transboundary Rivers" (December 20, 2006), "On Mutual exchange of hydrological and hydrochemical information of border gauging stations on major transboundary rivers" (December 20, 2006).

In the future, the leadership of the PRC has repeatedly voiced assurances that the Chinese side will not allow any actions that could harm neighboring states in the issue of transboundary water resources (Bai, 2006). But in any case it will be an error to idealize the current state of affairs. It should be noted, for example, that the

Chinese side continues to call negotiations on water resources only as consultations, which to some extent reduces their international significance. In the Chinese media, the issue of transboundary rivers is very rarely addressed. According to the Chinese side, this problem is greatly exaggerated and inflated in other countries. With respect to Kazakhstan, there is the opinion that all these issues can be resolved through negotiations and such an alarming resonance should not be maintained in society (Xing, 2011). Such a leveling of the problem is highly alarming and suggests that a rapid and a significant shift in this area is not foreseen in the long run. And the main thing, despite all the positive tendencies, this problem has not received any actual solution yet.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Given the undeniable importance and relevance, the topic of transboundary water resources attracts the attention of many researchers around the world. The issue of transboundary rivers in the context of China-Kazakhstan relations is mainly addressed by Kazakhstan and Russian authors: E. Idrisov (1999), R.G. Jamalov (2011, 2012), A.A. Mamontov (2012), I.Yu. Pukhnyarskaya (2013), Zh.K. Kaiyrbaeva (2012), etc. Chinese experts actually ignore this subject. Russian and Kazakh researchers consider some or other legal and economic aspects of the problem. A comprehensive analysis of the issue is not presented in modern research literature and the media.

The Chinese side is not in a hurry to conclude a final agreement on the joint use of transboundary rivers, and actually it does not fulfill its obligations, continuing its unilateral use of water resources. The main problem is that the lack of a firm position and perseverance in the matter from the leadership of Kazakhstan with almost complete disregard of the problem by China can ultimately lead to irreversible consequences for the ecology, landscape, nature management and life of the population of the regions, which will influence the general stability in Central Asia: pollution and the lack of water will lead to social tension, which in its turn will cause political non-stability. The need for a multilateral format to solve the problem with the involvement of other interested countries (Russia and other Central Asian states) is obvious. In this context, the issue within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which unites all interested parties, can be optimal.

#### **5. Recommendations**

The materials of this article may be of interest to researchers involved in international relations, the Central Asian region, Chinese foreign policy, modern Kazakhstan history and diplomacy, the environmental problems of the Eurasian continent, etc.

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