

The Uzbekistan Border with Kazakhstan

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25 January 2000 marked the first time that Uzbekistan implemented irredentist claims on Kazakhstan's territory.¹ Foreign Minister Erlan Idrisov told journalists in Almaty on 27 January that two days previously Uzbek border guards, backed by an armoured personnel carrier, moved 5 km into Sary-Aghash and Qazyqurt districts of southern Kazakhstan. Inside Kazakhstani territory they set about marking a new 60 km stretch of the border. Local Kazakh residents subsequently removed the border markings and protested.² This article assesses the background and reasons behind Uzbekistan's unilateral action.

The media in Kazakhstan immediately denounced the move as an irredentist claim by Uzbekistan. However, although the Kazakhstani government issued a prompt reaction, it was initially keen to minimise the incident. Visiting South-Kazakhstan region, Idrisov explained to local journalists that his visit was not connected with recent events but was simply a fact-finding mission.³ The failure of the Kazakhstani government to comment extensively on the event inevitably led to popular rumours. Some claimed that Uzbekistan harboured further ambitions, particularly over the Makta-aral district; others contended that Uzbekistan had even bought three million dollars' worth of barbed wire to construct border fencing.⁴ Meanwhile Idrisov explained to Reuters News Agency that Kazakhstani and Uzbek government officials had reached an agreement in parallel to the 25 January 2000 CIS summit to set up a joint commission to demarcate the border. This was to meet for the first time in March. In the meantime Idrisov affirmed that Kazakhstan "will not cede one metre" of its territory to Uzbekistan.⁵

Victor Zhuchkov, Deputy Commander of Kazakhstan's border guards, commented independently on the incident.⁶ He explained how Kazakhstan's frontier troops immediately left for the Sary-Aghash district but upon arrival were unable to stop the action of the Uzbek frontier guards. That jurisdiction lay alone with Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Like Kazakhstan's border with Russia and with Kyrgyzstan, that with Uzbekistan is not yet guarded. Checkpoints, customs facilities and border patrols – the hallmarks of state borders – are not functioning. In all three cases, as shall be seen, important economic and political legacies exist to encourage the survival of open borders. Only the Kazakhstani-Chinese border is guarded – and that because personnel is provided by Russia. Effectively all existing Kazakhstani borders are porous and are considered as part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

The dispute with Uzbekistan escalated further in mid-February when Idrisov criticised Uzbek officials for what he said was a totally illegitimate action. Saying that "we have informed the Uzbek side in strong terms that its steps are inadmissible," Idrisov warned that Kazakhstan "will not give up an inch of land." On 15 February the Kazakhstan delegation on border talks with Uzbekistan was instructed to demand a speedy demarcation of the Kazakh-Uzbek frontier.⁷ Kazakhstan's Prime Minister Kasymzhomart Tokaev insisted that talks were making progress, despite a slow start, and declared that: "No structures along the border, whatever reasons they are based on – the fight against terrorism, bandits and so forth – are possible without the delimitation of the border."⁸

On 22 March Uzbek border guards again sought a unilateral demarcation of the frontier with Kazakhstan. Reportedly trucks crossed from Uzbekistan 10 kilometres into South-Kazakhstan region and began unsanctioned marking of a new border. So perturbed was the Kazakhstani government that on 23 March, former Kazakhstan Customs head Ghani Qasymov noted that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan faced the same border issues with Uzbekistan. He even went so far as to encourage the Kazakhstani government to establish a military bloc of Central Asian states against Uzbekistan.⁹ Once again residents demonstrated and Uzbekistani officials agreed again to postpone the beginning of construction work. Speaking in Astana on 1 April, Idrisov again denied that any tensions exist along unpopulated stretches of the border that are currently being demarcated. Significantly, he did however admit that demarcation is proving more problematic in populated areas. He offered renewed assurances that Uzbekistan would not proceed with further delimitation without Kazakhstan's agreement.¹⁰

These events coincided with President Nursultan Nazarbaev's declaration of a new security doctrine. In mid-January 2000 Nazarbaev also issued a set of guidelines to the military, along with a presidential message to the country on the "Stability and Security of Kazakhstan into a new century." These pinpointed several potential threats to national security in the short and medium term and included: "local conflicts or instability in neighbouring countries affecting Kazakhstan's internal situation and posing the risk of spillover; infiltration of religious extremist or criminal armed groups into Kazakhstan; and the dissemination of inflammatory religious or nationalist propaganda from abroad which is aimed at 'activating destructive forces' within Kazakhstan."¹¹ To counter these possible threats, Nazarbaev has supported the military's request for an immediate increase in the defence budget to 1 percent of the gross domestic product in 2000, compared to 0.86% in 1999 (which represents a 30% increase). Moreover, as of the beginning of February 2000 Kazakhstan ceased to recognise transit visas issued to foreigners by other CIS member states. Kazakhstan's decision follows similar measures implemented by Uzbekistan and Russia and is another indication that the CIS is gradually weakening.¹²

As of this spring, the army will substantially increase the forces stationed in border areas of southern Kazakhstan, opposite Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Some army garrisons across the country are being chosen for transfer to the southern region. Some border guard units are likewise being relocated to the same area. Marat Tazhin, Secretary of Kazakhstan's Security Council, added that Uzbek-Kazakh borders would not be demarcated from either side until the Uzbek-Kazakh commission had so decided. The commission was to meet for the first time in March.

Three interrelated factors encouraged the incursions: economic interdependence, irredentist claims and fierce competition between the two states to be recognised as regional leader by the international community.

The disputed areas are densely populated and contain fertile land, a precious commodity in water-starved Central Asia. Moreover, although initially it was recognised that both states would benefit from economic co-operation, soon both states became locked into a competitive spiral. Both export raw materials: Kazakhstan principally grain and oil, Uzbekistan cotton and gold. There was little scope for co-operation in these goods. Instead, both states soon saw how this economic dependence on raw materials could be exploited in the race for regional rivalry. The southern regions of Kazakhstan, which have no power transmission

lines or gas pipelines connecting them with the north and the centre of the country, depend almost exclusively on supplies of electricity and gas from Uzbekistan. For its part, Uzbekistan depends on Kazakh grain and on the goodwill of the Kazakhstani government to allow the cheap and safe passage of goods over Kazakhstani territory. Uzbekistan has often cut off gas supplies to Kazakhstan's southern region, leaving these districts exposed to several months without electricity and hot water. Kazakhstan has been able to use its location to exact higher transport tariffs on Uzbekistan's goods in transit across its territory.

Uzbekistan has preferred to cut off gas supplies than to employ the tactic it has used in its relations with other Central Asian states: the placing of ethnic and political pressure on its neighbours by means of the ethnic Uzbek diasporas resident in these states. The fact that Uzbekistan has so far resisted using this tool in Kazakhstan exposes the greater fragility of Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan relations – on both sides. Domestically, while Uzbeks in Kazakhstan comprise just over 2 percent (about 400,000) and are concentrated in one area, the number of Kazakhs in Uzbekistan is some 4-5% (about 1.2 million today), and comprise as much as 26% of the Karakalpakistan population (making up 39.5% of Uzbeks in Kazakhstan). Among the Karakalpaks there is an entrenched wish to join the Russian Federation or Kazakhstan and accounts suggest that ethnic Kazakhs in Karakalpakistan feel the same. In the other ethnic Kazakh-populated area of the Tashkent region, irredentist claims by Kazakhstan are also a possibility: the Tashkent region had for several years been under the rule of the Kazakh khans and under Soviet rule, control of several districts populated predominantly by Kazakhs was transferred from South-Kazakhstan to the Tashkent region.¹³ The Uzbek diaspora, almost exclusively based in the South-Kazakhstan area, may eventually provide a fifth column as it has done in other Central Asian states, not least as local Uzbeks of the South Kazakhstan region monopolise the business and religious elite. They have proven particularly adept at reaping the gains from the fertile land of this district and as such have become a source of envy to some local ethnic Kazakhs.

The stakes of economic reform and irredentism have been raised by international players in the region. In the Soviet era, Moscow tacitly granted Uzbekistan the status of regional leader; this division was facilitated by the fact that Kazakhstan was considered to lie outside Central Asia proper.

Attempts by Uzbekistan to reassert its former status of regional leader in the early 1990s did not meet with success. Neither state possessed sufficient economic power to become a leader; the states were also weakened by the withdrawal of Moscow from the region, a former source of stability. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan did not abandon the struggle for regional domination, although to date Russia has not played an active role in this struggle. Instead the process has been largely a function of these two states' own foreign policy choices, and whilst Uzbekistan has been wary of partnership with Russia, Kazakhstan sees integration with its northern neighbour as the key to economic survival and internal political stability.

More significant than the role of Russia has been that of China and the West. China has sought particularly close relations with Kazakhstan, including the pledge in 1998 to construct an oil pipeline across Kazakhstani territory. China has sought assurances from Kazakhstan that it will not support Uighur separatism and its National Petroleum Corporation was awarded a 60% stake in the Aqtobe power plant in 1998. In addition to Russia and China, Kazakhstan has actively courted the West and until recently has appeared to have been more successful at this than

Uzbekistan. This was particularly demonstrated by the implementation almost to the letter of an economic policy designed by the IMF, with which it signed a standard 'stand-by' treaty. Even more significant was the signing of a 'Democratic Partnership Charter', establishing in 1997 a strategic partnership between Kazakhstan and the United States. Most Western states continue to maintain a balance between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, but some (particularly the United States) have given their backing to Uzbekistan. This may partly be a result of Uzbekistan's own decision to concentrate its foreign policy efforts on the USA, unlike Kazakhstan which has continued to pursue a "multi-vector" foreign policy. The US' current disaffection with Kazakhstan has been partly encouraged by the republic's perceived undemocratic 1999 parliamentary and presidential elections. This may have encouraged Uzbekistan to assert its aspirations more confidently and forcefully.

To conclude, for the foreseeable future, neither Uzbekistan nor Kazakhstan has sufficient economic and political potential to establish itself as the undisputed leader in Central Asia. Nor are Russia, the US or China likely to reach a consensus on who this regional leader should be. More immediately, with population growth, each of the Central Asian countries is interested in gaining the maximum amount of territory and watershed. The recent incursions by Uzbekistan may thus be seen as part of a fundamental weakness in the statehood of these sovereign republics and of deeply embedded tensions between these two regional rivals. Regional players would be wise to consider carefully this environment when formulating policies toward these respective states.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 *Chimkent News (in Russian)* at <http://www.news.dolphin.kz/2000/02/25022000.htm>
- 2 *RFE/RL NEWSLINE*, Vol 4, No 20, Part I, 26 January 2000.
- 3 *Reuters News Agency*, 1 February 2000.
- 4 <http://www.news.dolphin.kz/2000/02/28022000.htm>
- 5 *RFE/RL NEWSLINE*, Vol 4, No 20, Part I, 28 January 2000.
- 6 *Vremya po Grinvichu*, Almaty, 3 February 2000.
- 7 *Khabar TV News*, 15 February 2000.
- 8 *RFE/RL NEWSLINE*, 16 February 2000.
- 9 *RFE/RL NEWSLINE*, Vol 4, No 59, Part I, 23 March 2000.
- 10 *RFE/RL NEWSLINE*, Vol 4, No 66, Part I, 3 April 2000.
- 11 *The Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Vol VI, No 23, 2 February 2000.
- 12 *Reuters News Agency* (Almaty), 1 February 2000.
- 13 See *Prism*, The Jamestown Foundation, February 2000, No 2, Parts 3 and 4.

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