

## Hydro-hegemony and transboundary conflict resolution: the case of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

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### **Abstract**

Uzbekistan, which has been traditionally viewed as the hydro-hegemon in the Amu Darya and Syr Darya river basins, has been historically opposed to the construction of dams by its neighbors Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on these rivers. Following the death of President Islam Karimov in 2016, Uzbekistan's policy changed, and the country started to redesign its policy framework with Kyrgyzstan, signing a historic border demarcation deal and an agreement on the joint construction of the Kambar-Ata 1 Hydroelectric Power Plant.

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Biographie: Nodir Ataev est doctorant dans le programme d'études sur le développement mondial à l'université Queen's. Il a obtenu un diplôme de spécialiste (2011) à l'université internationale Alatau de Bichkek, au Kirghizistan, et un master en arts (2013) à l'université d'Europe centrale de Budapest, en Hongrie. Il a dix ans d'expérience dans le secteur de l'aide au développement, ayant travaillé pour l'Organisation pour la sécurité et la coopération en Europe (OSCE), ACTED, et Family Health International 360 (FHI 360). Les recherches d'Ataev se concentrent sur l'examen des relations transfrontalières en matière d'eau d'un point de vue politico-économique dans la vallée de Fergana, une région densément peuplée divisée entre les États modernes du Kirghizistan, du Tadjikistan et de l'Ouzbékistan. Il parle couramment cinq langues et apprend actuellement le français, sa sixième langue.

Several developments, including internal challenges and changes in Uzbekistan's bargaining power against Kyrgyzstan, pushed the former to redefine its hydro-hegemony. Based on an analysis of bilateral accords, official press releases, commentary by officials coupled with quantitative data collected from secondary sources, I attempt to demonstrate that hydro-hegemony can effectively explain transboundary relations between the two countries both before and after 2016. More broadly, I argue that as the power asymmetry changes, hydro-hegemons are forced to revise their discourses.

Keywords: Hydro-hegemony; transboundary water governance; Syr Darya; Kyrgyzstan; Uzbekistan

## Résumé

L'Ouzbékistan, traditionnellement considéré comme l'hydro-hégémon des bassins des fleuves Amu Darya et Syr Darya, s'est toujours opposé à la construction de barrages par ses voisins, le Kirghizistan et le Tadjikistan, sur ces fleuves. Après la mort du président Islam Karimov en 2016, la politique de l'Ouzbékistan a changé et le pays a commencé à redéfinir son cadre politique avec le Kirghizistan, signant un accord historique sur la démarcation de la frontière et un accord sur la construction conjointe de la centrale hydroélectrique de Kambar-Ata 1. Plusieurs événements, notamment des défis internes et des changements dans le pouvoir de négociation de l'Ouzbékistan face au Kirghizistan, ont poussé l'Ouzbékistan à redéfinir son hégémonie sur l'hydroélectricité. Sur la base d'une analyse des accords bilatéraux, des communiqués de presse officiels, des commentaires des fonctionnaires et des données quantitatives recueillies auprès de sources secondaires, je tente de démontrer que l'hydro-hégémonie peut expliquer efficacement les relations transfrontalières entre les deux pays avant et après 2016. Plus généralement, je soutiens qu'à mesure que l'asymétrie de pouvoir change, les hydro-hégémons sont contraints de réviser leurs discours.

Mots-clés: Hydro-hégémonie ; gouvernance de l'eau transfrontalière ; Syr Darya ; Kirghizistan ; Ouzbékistan

Uzbekistan vehemently opposed the construction of dams on transboundary rivers in upstream Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for over quarter of a century. Then, after the death of independent Uzbekistan's first President, Islam Karimov, in 2016, the country started to negotiate a new framework with its neighbors on managing transboundary rivers. Not only did Uzbekistan stop criticizing its neighbors' plans to build large dams, but in January 2023 signed a roadmap agreement with Kyrgyzstan to finance the construction of the Kambar-Ata 1 Dam and Hydroelectric Power Station on the Naryn River.

In this paper, I attempt to explain Uzbekistan's redefinition of its policy towards upstream Kyrgyzstan through the lens of hydro-hegemony. Employing Zeitoun and Warner's (2006) framework of hydro-hegemony and Roseberry's (1994) conceptualization of hegemony as a problematic and fragile process, I analyze Uzbekistan's water policy towards Kyrgyzstan along the Syr Darya River since 2016. I have chosen 2016 as a break point because following the death of President Karimov, Uzbekistan almost immediately started to redefine its foreign policy, including its policy regarding managing transboundary rivers. What drove Uzbekistan to sign a border deal and agree to the construction of a mega dam upstream in Kyrgyzstan after years of dispute? How can an analytical approach based on hydro-hegemony and power asymmetry help explain Uzbekistan's reworked water policy framework? These are the main questions I examine in this article.

There is a rich body of literature on the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic strategies in transboundary river basins. The Nile River basin is one of the most studied hydro-hegemonic configurations. In the Nile basin, Egypt is usually viewed as the hegemon, with Ethiopia depicted as a weaker riparian or a "counter-hegemon". Rather like Uzbekistan, Egypt was forced to reconsider its hegemony after it faced a "fact on the ground" challenge, namely the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) (Ilkbar & Mercan, 2023). While Egypt initially reacted to the project aggressively, even threatening to bomb it, once the GERD became a *fait accompli* the country revised its position and acknowledged Ethiopia's right to use the waters of the Nile and eventually signed the Declaration of Principles with Ethiopia and Sudan (Tekuya, 2020). As in the case of

Egypt, Uzbekistan was forced to revise its hydro-hegemony because of changes in power asymmetries, albeit the two cases differ in many respects. While in both cases the dominant hydro-hegemony was challenged and had to be revised due to the realities on the ground, a hydro-hegemon changing its policy radically as in the case of Uzbekistan is an exception rather than the rule. Therefore, Uzbekistan presents a unique case.

The primary research method for this study has been a review of the limited extant literature coupled with political discourse analysis. I have employed political discourse analysis using a qualitative approach, paying close attention to the speeches of Kyrgyz and Uzbek high-level government figures, bilateral accords, official press releases, and news articles published before and after 2016. I have primarily focused on the speeches and press releases by high-level government officials such as presidents, prime ministers, as well as ministers and their direct subordinates. For the media coverage, I focused on articles that appeared in state media and independent publications with established readership such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Eurasianet. I have also used quantitative data collected from secondary sources.<sup>13</sup>

I argue that a hydro-hegemony approach can help explain Uzbekistan's reworked water framework, and that hydro-hegemons revise their stance as their bargaining power changes, meaning hydro-hegemonic processes are continually contested. Through this finding, I aim to contribute to the field of transboundary water management by demonstrating how the concepts of hydro-hegemony and power imbalance can be employed to better analyze transboundary water relations.

## **The Syr Darya River Basin**

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<sup>13</sup> An important caveat should be pointed out here: when analyzing transboundary issues, official sources should be treated with a pinch of salt (Zeitoun & Allan, 2008). In addition, data are not always available or are only partially available on many issues that have a bearing on an analysis of transboundary relations in Central Asia.

Tensions over water have remained high in Central Asia, especially in the Fergana Valley, a densely populated region divided between the modern states of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Figure 1). Water is a vital resource in the region, as agriculture is the backbone of the economy of the Fergana Valley (Mosello, 2008). The valley serves as a major source of food for Central Asia and many families living in the region depend on agriculture both as a source of income and sustenance.

**Figure 1**

*The Fergana Valley*



Source: prepared by the author based on a German map. Wikimedia Commons. Nataev, CC BY-SA 4.0

The Syr Darya and the Amu Darya lie at the heart of most water disputes in Central Asia. In this article, I focus on transboundary water relations in the Syr Darya river basin, which generally flows west from Kyrgyzstan through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and

Kazakhstan into the Aral Sea.<sup>14</sup> The Syr Darya is formed by the confluence of the Naryn and Kara Darya rivers, both of which start in Kyrgyzstan.

Following the dissolution of the USSR, centralized water, energy, and land management relations broke down, leaving the Central Asian states to agree on how to distribute resources around the new national borders. Even before the break-up of the Soviet Union there were disputes over water resources between the Central Asian republics, as there had been strong intra-republic tensions over shared resources even during the Soviet period (Roberts, 2022). However, they were not openly discussed, and Russia played the role of mediator and, rather literally, Big Brother.<sup>15</sup> Still, transboundary conflicts have become more frequent and more violent in the years following independence. Though some efforts have been undertaken, the countries have so far failed to set up an effective framework for water allocation and prevention of conflict (Bernauer & Siegfried, 2012; Menga, 2017).

Water has often been singled out as a major driver of conflict in the region (Mosello, 2008; Smith, 1995). Indeed, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan have experienced years of dispute over water allocation. Most recently, in late April 2021 a dispute over irrigation water triggered a military confrontation between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, resulting in the death of 55 people. During a dramatic escalation of the conflict in September 2022, over 130 people were killed (Bifolchi & Boltuc, 2023). This is not to say that the clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan can be categorized as a “water war”. While it is beyond the scope of this research, it is important to note that other factors such as disputed borders, rising nationalism, and politics have played a far more important role in intra-state tensions in the region.

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<sup>14</sup> In one of the worst anthropogenic global environmental disasters, the Aral Sea has largely dried up, further complicating water relations in the region. The sea, which once was the world’s fourth largest body of inland water, started to shrink in the 1960s as the Soviets diverted the waters of the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya for irrigation purposes.

<sup>15</sup> The first line of the anthem of the Uzbek SSR read “Peace be upon you, Russian people, our great brother”.

In Central Asia, the competing demands for irrigation and hydropower are a further source of conflict. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are upstream countries, have sought to construct dams and other hydroelectric power projects to meet their growing energy needs and generate income by selling excess electricity (Menga, 2017). Uzbekistan, along with Kazakhstan, is a downstream country and relies heavily on the water from these rivers for agriculture and other industries (Figure 2).<sup>16</sup> Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan prefer to utilize the waters of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya when demand for hydropower production is highest, particularly in the winter to spring season. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, on the other hand, are interested in getting enough water for irrigation during the growing season, which lasts from April to September (Bernauer & Siegfried, 2012). Both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have argued – albeit the latter less vigorously than the former – that dams constructed upstream can significantly impact the water flow and quality downstream, having serious consequences for agriculture and water safety in downstream countries. In this paper, I focus on Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and to some extent Tajikistan, but not on Kazakhstan. This is because compared to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan is less reliant on agriculture and thus is less sensitive to water variability.

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted here that because of the way the Central Asian borders were drawn up by the Soviets, Uzbekistan is both upstream and downstream of Tajikistan with respect to the Syr Darya.

**Figure 2**

*Aral Sea Watershed*



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Until 2016, Uzbekistan’s prevailing strategy against the dam projects was based on several discourses, including concerns over water scarcity, environmental degradation, and the potential for conflict between upstream and downstream countries (Menga, 2017). For years the country advocated for cooperation and the equitable sharing of water resources in the region, as well as the use of alternative sources of energy that do not depend on the construction of dams. Uzbekistan often resorted to drastic measures, including cutting gas supplies to Kyrgyzstan, and launching a long-standing campaign against the construction of dams upstream (ibid.). Uzbekistan’s calls for sharing water equitably and using alternative sources of energy are rather hypocritical, especially given the



extremely wasteful nature of cotton irrigation in the country (see, for example, Mollinga & Veldwisch, 2016).

Against this backdrop, in 2022, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed agreements on delimitating disputed parts of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border and on the joint management of a water reservoir located on the border. As part of the border demarcation settlement, Kyrgyzstan agreed to transfer the land under the Andijan Water Reservoir<sup>17</sup> to Uzbekistan in exchange for land elsewhere (Rickleton, 2023b). The reservoir, which has an area of about 56 square kilometers, is on the Kara Darya River, one of the source rivers of the Syr Darya. The reservoir was completed in 1983 and had been disputed by Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan since the two countries gained independence in 1991. The two countries also disputed the ownership of the much smaller Kasan-Sai Water Reservoir,<sup>18</sup> which is also in the Fergana Valley (Shustov, 2016). The reservoir was built on Kyrgyz SSR territory with Uzbek SSR money on the Kasan-Sai River, another tributary of the Syr Darya. Since its construction, the reservoir has been de facto controlled by Uzbekistan. In fact, Uzbekistan had troops stationed there until 2016 (Joldoshev, 2017). While in authoritarian Uzbekistan there was hardly any public discussion of the 2022 border deal, in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, the issue became a flashpoint for domestic opposition. Kyrgyz authorities pushed the accord through parliament without disclosing the particulars of the agreement to the public, which outraged many citizens and sparked demonstrations in the capital and the region where the Andijan Reservoir is located. Over 20 people who opposed the agreement were jailed on dubious charges and independent media came under unprecedented pressure (Rickleton, 2023b). Kyrgyzstanis who have opposed the border deal have maintained that not only does it deprive Kyrgyz farmers of water, but it also significantly weakens Kyrgyzstan's bargaining power against Uzbekistan (Mamatzhanova, 2021).

These developments since 2016, including the border deal between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and the latter's agreement to jointly build the Kambar-Ata 1 Dam in the territory of the former, have not yet

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<sup>17</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, the reservoir is called Kempir-Abad.

<sup>18</sup> Formerly called the Orto-Tokoy Water Reservoir.

been closely studied. Moreover, water-related conflicts in the Fergana Valley are often analyzed under resource scarcity and “water wars” frameworks (Sievers, 2001). Such approaches have been criticized for being misguided and unsupported by the available evidence (Barnett, 2000; Selby et al., 2022; Toset et al., 2000). For one thing, they disregard power relations as well as cultural and political drivers of conflict (Burgess et al., 2016). For instance, scarcity-based analysis often fails to account for power asymmetry lying at the core of conflicts over water. It has been argued that in transboundary river basins power and hegemony are more important than international water law, water sharing ethics, or the geographical location of competing riparian states (Zeitoun & Allan, 2008).

Only a few scholars have used alternative frameworks such as power relations and hegemony when analyzing transboundary water interactions in Central Asia (Menga & Mirumachi, 2016; Zhupankhan et al., 2017; Wegerich, 2008; Zinzani & Menga, 2017). Filippo Menga’s 2017 book *Power and Water in Central Asia* is a notable exception, as it offers a comprehensive analysis of overt and covert power shaping transboundary relations in the region. However, much has changed in the region since the book’s publication in 2017.

## Conceptual Framework

### Power and Hegemony

Alternatives to scarcity-based and conflict-based analyses of transboundary water relations put power and hegemony at the center of analysis. The notions of power and hegemony are closely interrelated. Power, despite being an increasingly important issue in the social sciences, is a contested concept, and there is no universally accepted definition of it (Rein, 2017). For the purposes of this paper, I use the conceptualization of power offered by Menga (2016) as “the ability or capacity of an actor to get a desired outcome through coercive, bargaining, and ideational means” (p. 405). Menga’s conceptualization of power is based on the work of Cascão and Zeitoun (2010), who applied Steven Luke’s original work on the three faces of power to water politics. Cascão and Zeitoun distinguish between four forms of power, namely, geographical,

material, bargaining, and ideational/discursive power (Rein, 2017). Geographical power refers to the geographical position of a riparian state; material power includes a riparian country's military strength, geographic position, size, population, and economy; bargaining power refers to the ability of a riparian to define political agendas; finally, ideational or discursive power has to do with a riparian country's ability to impose an advantageous discourse or ideology. A related concept to power is hegemony, which is variously defined, but is basically used to denote some sort of dominance or leadership of one group over another. The term has been used in its modern sense since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Rosamond, 2020). It was the Italian, Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci who popularized the concept by using it to explore the way in which dominant groups maintain their power over subordinate groups through the exercise of cultural and ideological influence as well as economic and political power (Femia, 1987).

Hegemony should not be confused with domination. Coercion plays a considerably less important role than the active consent of subordinate groups in a hegemonic setting (Wright, 2010). Zeitoun and Warner (2006) differentiate between hegemony, which is "leadership buttressed by authority", and dominance, which they define as "leadership buttressed by coercion" (p. 438). Hegemony is often viewed as "a problematic, contested, political process of domination and struggle" (Roseberry, 1994, p. 358). As Roseberry argues, for Gramsci hegemony was indeed a fragile process. Gramsci demonstrated how the interactions between governing and subaltern groups are characterized by contention, struggle, and argument. This idea is similar to the idea of a fragile state, or the fact that "the illusion of cohesion and unitariness created by states is always contested and fragile" (Sharma & Gupta, 2006, p. 11). The case of Uzbekistan's hydro-hegemony yields support to Roseberry's interpretation of Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony, as will be demonstrated below.

According to Menga (2016), power is a means to an end, with the end being "the achievement and retention of hegemony" (p. 409). Applying the concepts of power and hegemony, scholars have developed the framework of hydro-hegemony, to which I turn now.

## Hydro-Hegemony

Hydro-hegemony is largely based on the concept of hegemony, as developed by Gramsci. Just as there are many different notions of hegemony, there are different conceptualizations of hydro-hegemony. Zeitoun and Warner, who offer one of the most comprehensive conceptualizations of the framework of hydro-hegemony, originally defined it as “hegemony at the river basin level, achieved through water resource control strategies such as resource capture, integration and containment” (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006, p. 435). Later, they added that hegemony depends on “the skilful use of hard and soft forms of power, between formally equal parties such as nation states” (Zeitoun & Allan, 2008, p. 3). Menga defines hydro-hegemony as “the success of a basin riparian in imposing a discourse, preserving its interests and impeding changes to a convenient status quo” (Menga, 2017, p. 39). Just as for Gramsci hegemony was not simply based on force or coercion but more on the ability of a dominant group to shape ideology and consciousness, hydro-hegemony also focuses on ideology and knowledge construction rather than coercion or domination.

A parallel can be drawn between imposing a discourse and the general paradigm of state regulation as outlined by Corrigan and Sayer (1985): states support some discourses, while at same time suppressing and undermining others. Moreover, disputing parties usually present their discourse in contradistinction to that of the opposing side and use moralistic language (Hanke & Gray, 2006). Indeed, both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have been “encouraging” and “suppressing” conflicting discourses on managing the transboundary rivers that flow through their territories. Until 2016 Uzbekistan actively used several tactics to promote its own discourse on transboundary water management, including by organizing conferences, seeking the international community’s support (including at the UN General Assembly), and supporting research into potential undesirable consequences of its neighbors’ water ambitions. Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, has supported a discourse on the unjust status quo that Uzbekistan has maintained since Soviet times and has tried to portray the Kambar Ata-1 Dam project as an important national project (Menga, 2017). Such discourses can be termed “hegemonic projects” (Jessop, 2016).

Exploring transboundary water relations as hegemonic projects is useful for two main reasons. First, in practice hydro-hegemons rarely resort to force and violence, even when competing parties are not equal (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006). Second, hydro-hegemony can help explain how and why riparian countries continually change their hegemonic projects and create new frameworks. The second argument is closely aligned with Roseberry's (1994) interpretation of hegemony, which calls for viewing it as a contested and continual process of domination and struggle.

### **Uzbekistan's Hydro-Hegemony**

Uzbekistan has traditionally been considered the hegemon in both the Amu Darya and Syr Darya river basins, partly due to its stronger military, large population, large irrigated area, and its preservation of advantageous water allocation schemes established in Soviet times (Bernauer & Siegfried, 2012; Menga, 2016). In addition, Uzbekistan has been a hydro-hegemon because of its stronger bargaining power stemming from its natural gas reserves, which the upstream countries of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lack.<sup>19</sup> However, there is some dispute as to whether Uzbekistan is actually a hydro-hegemon in the region (Wegerich, 2008).

In any case, referring back to Menga's definition of hydro-hegemony, Uzbekistan has 1) imposed certain discourses or hegemonic projects (for instance, by highlighting how dams could lead to water scarcity, environmental degradation, and conflict and by calling on its neighbors to explore alternative sources of energy); 2) strived to protect its interests (by demanding water for its irrigation during the harvest season, defending its territory, seeking to keep or obtain control of key water objects); and 3) fought against changes to the status quo (namely, water sharing arrangements developed in Soviet times). I discuss each in more detail below.

### ***Imposing a Discourse***

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<sup>19</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, domestic natural gas production accounts for only two percent of the country's natural gas needs (Kalybekova, 2013).

Uzbek politicians have been historically critical of the Rogun Dam being built on the Amu Darya by Tajikistan and have used their bargaining power to influence other countries such as Russia interested in financing the project. On several occasions, Uzbekistan blocked the transportation of construction materials meant for the Rogun Dam through its territory (Shustov, 2016). Uzbekistan has also opposed the construction of the Kambar-Ata 1 Dam on the Naryn River being built by Kyrgyzstan, albeit somewhat less vocally. Menga (2017) argues that this is primarily because Kyrgyzstan already has a cascade of dams on the Naryn, meaning the river is already regulated and that Kyrgyzstan already possesses some bargaining power. Indeed, about 90 percent of the mean annual flow of the Syr Darya is regulated by dams (Bernauer & Siegfried, 2012). Nevertheless, Uzbekistan has taken several measures to hinder the completion of the project, such as pressuring Kyrgyzstan to abandon the project by cutting gas supplies to the country.

### ***Protecting Own Interests***

Uzbekistan has forcefully defended its national interests, including by exercising what has been termed material power in hydropolitics. Tashkent frequently demonstrated its military might to its neighbors. Just before the death of long-time President Karimov in September 2016, Kyrgyzstan accused Uzbekistan of deploying its troops to the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, close to the disputed Kasan-Sai Water Reservoir (Rickleton, 2023). The country has also used its bargaining and ideational power to secure enough water for its farmers. Thus, it is no surprise that Uzbekistan has strived to preserve the Soviet water division schemes, which allocated most of the waters of the Syr Darya to the country.

### ***Maintaining the Status Quo***

Water sharing arrangements in Central Asia were centrally managed by Russia during Soviet times. The Soviets allocated respectively 0.4 percent and 0.5 percent of the waters of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers to Kyrgyzstan, while earmarking 29.6 percent of the Amu Darya and 10.4 percent of the Syr Darya waters for Uzbekistan (Kalybekova, 2013). Following the disassembly of the USSR, Uzbekistan has largely retained the status quo on using the waters of

the two rivers. This has meant that the country still receives a large share of water from the two rivers to irrigate its cotton fields and other crops, as well as to supply drinking water to cities and towns.

### **Reworked Hegemony**

Uzbekistan's foreign policy has undergone significant changes since Karimov's death in 2016. His successor, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has implemented a range of reforms aimed at opening up the country and engaging more with the international community. Under Karimov's leadership, Uzbekistan had a highly isolationist foreign policy, which resulted in strained relations with its neighboring countries. Karimov is said to have been personally responsible for the country's aggressive campaign against the construction of large dams in upstream Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

I argue that Karimov's death is not the only or even the primary reason that led Uzbekistan to rework its hydro-hegemony. As will be shown below, two other developments since 2013, namely severe energy crises in Uzbekistan and the weakening of the country's gas leverage over its neighbors have weakened Uzbekistan's bargaining power as a hydro-hegemon. However, these developments do not mean that Uzbekistan is no longer a hegemon. Rather, the country has simply redefined its hegemonic project (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Uzbekistan's Hydro-Hegemony Before and After 2016*

	<b>Pre-2016</b>	<b>Post-2016</b>
<b>Imposing a discourse</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dams lead to water scarcity, environmental degradation, and conflict</li> <li>• Neighbors need to explore</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We need to build dams jointly to ensure energy security</li> </ul>

	alternative sources of energy	
<b>Preserving its interests</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water for irrigation (when needed)</li> <li>• Land</li> <li>• Control over key objects (reservoirs, canals, rivers)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water for irrigation (when needed)</li> <li>• Land</li> <li>• Control over key objects (reservoirs, canals, rivers)</li> <li>• Electricity and gas for citizens</li> </ul>
<b>Maintaining the status quo</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soviet water division</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soviet water division with some unavoidable compromises</li> </ul>

Before Shavkat Mirziyoyev became president in 2016, Uzbek officials had opposed the construction of the Kambar-Ata 1 Dam on the Naryn River by Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan demanded that an external examination be conducted into the project and its possible impact on the region. In 2012, Deputy Prime Minister Rustam Azimov, who was directly supervised by the then Prime Minister Mirziyoyev, stated the following about the Kambar-Ata 1 and Rogun dams:

Projects for investment cooperation in the construction of large hydropower structures on rivers flowing through the territories of several countries should undergo an authoritative and independent international examination. [Such an examination] should contain an assessment of the impact [of the projects] on the state of regional ecology, the careful use of natural resources, and the dangers of a technogenic nature (Beishenbek kyzy, 2012).



Once Mirziyoyev became president in 2016, Uzbekistan changed its discourse (Shustov, 2016). In September 2017, Mirziyoyev publicly stated that Uzbekistan was ready to support the construction of the Kamabar-Ata 1 Dam. During a visit to the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek, Mirziyoyev said both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan “needed” the Kambar-Ata 1 Hydroelectric Power Plant:

We have reached a clear agreement. [President] Almazbek Sharshenovich [Atambayev] said that no power station will be built without the participation of Uzbekistan. I completely agree, and we will take active participation [in them], both financially and resource-wise, committing to whatever participation as needed. We will jointly build the Kambar-Ata Station. ... We must proceed carefully so that it is beneficial for the two sides (Elkeeva, 2017).

Following Karimov’s death, Uzbekistan also pulled back its forces from the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. In October 2017, the two countries signed an agreement on the joint use of the disputed Kasan-Sai Reservoir. According to the agreement, Kyrgyzstan is now the undisputed owner, but the two counties will jointly use it, with maintenance costs shared between the two according to water usage: Uzbekistan will use 90 percent of the reservoir’s water and thus cover most of the maintenance costs (Joldoshev, 2017). Before 2017, not only had Uzbekistan used the reservoir and guarded it with its armed forces but had also laid claim to its ownership.

While it is true that Karimov was personally opposed to Kyrgyzstan’s and Tajikistan’s hydro projects, his death does not fully explain Uzbekistan’s change of direction. For one thing, current President Mirziyoyev, who served as Prime Minister from 2003 until Karimov’s death, was also highly critical of neighboring countries’ hydro projects. In fact, from 2007 until Karimov’s death in 2016 Mirziyoyev engaged in a bitter epistolary debate with his Tajik counterpart about the merits and dangers of the Rogun Dam (Menga, 2017; Shustov, 2016). In a 2016 letter to Tajik Prime Minister Kokhir Rasulzoda, Mirziyoyev warned that the Rogun Dam posed a threat to the entire Central Asian region. Interestingly, Mirziyoyev’s letter, which was originally published on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, has since been deleted (Podrobdno, 2016). A major development that can help explain Uzbekistan’s changing discourse

has to do with an internal challenge the country is facing, namely severe energy shortages.

## **Energy Crises**

For the past few years Uzbekistan has experienced gas and electricity shortages, especially in winter months. This is largely due to decades of neglect, mismanagement, and large-scale corruption (RFE/RL, 2023). The 2022–2023 winter season was particularly challenging, with entire cities across the country left with no electricity, heating, or gas for several weeks. Even those living in the capital city of Tashkent, who had been spared during similar crises in the past, experienced gas and electricity cuts. In January 2023, the country decided to import Russian gas for the first time since gaining independence.

Considering these challenges, one could argue that the government of Uzbekistan decided it could benefit from additional electricity that the Kambar-Ata 1 Hydroelectric Power Plant could produce if completed. Some local experts have indeed argued that Uzbekistan stands to benefit from additional electricity generated by Kambar-Ata 1 (Elkeeva, 2017). The plant, once completed, is expected to generate 1,900 MW, allowing Kyrgyzstan to export electricity (Menga, 2017).<sup>20</sup> More broadly, Jalilov et al. (2013) have argued that if there is political will, both upstream and downstream countries can benefit from additional hydroelectricity produced in the region. Uzbekistan has not only stopped criticizing Kambar-Ata 1 but has even offered to co-finance the construction of the project. Before 2017, the idea of Uzbekistan agreeing to jointly build the dam “would have seemed unimaginable” (Rickleton, 2023a). As Menga argued in 2017, Kyrgyzstan’s efforts to counter Uzbekistan’s hegemony had been largely ineffective until then. Uzbekistan has also changed its discourse on the Rogun Dam, signing a memorandum of understanding with Tajikistan in June 2022 and committing to buy electricity once the power plant becomes operational (Eurasianet, 2022). A year earlier, Uzbekistan had agreed to jointly build two hydropower plants on the Zarafshon River, a former tributary of the

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<sup>20</sup> For comparison, the Toktogul Power Plant, Kyrgyzstan’s biggest hydro power plant in operation, has a capacity of 1,200 MW.

Amu Darya that now ends in the desert (Hashimova, 2021). Neither Kyrgyzstan nor Tajikistan upped its counter-hegemonic discourse after 2016, offering further support to the proposition that Uzbekistan's revised hegemony was most likely caused by energy shortages in the latter and other factors. One of these factors – particularly with respect to Kyrgyzstan – is the loss of an important leverage: natural gas.

### **Weakening Gas Power**

Another important development that likely influenced Uzbekistan's policy towards Kyrgyzstan has to do with Uzbekistan's reliance on natural gas imports from Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan, like Tajikistan, has been historically dependent on imports of natural gas from Uzbekistan. Especially during the rule of Karimov, Uzbekistan frequently resorted to cutting gas supplies to its neighbor to flex its muscles, which caused serious energy shortages in Kyrgyzstan (Menga, 2017).

However, the situation started to change in 2013, when Kyrgyzstan sold its natural gas network to Gazprom of Russia for the symbolic amount of 1 (one) US dollar (Kalybekova, 2013). In return, Gazprom pledged to invest millions of dollars to upgrade Kyrgyzstan's ailing gas infrastructure. Since 2013, the country has been importing increasingly more gas from Russia. While before 2013 Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were Kyrgyzstan's major gas suppliers, currently the country imports most of its natural gas from Russia. In fact, available data show that Russian exports of natural gas to Kyrgyzstan have been steadily increasing since 2017.<sup>21</sup>

In light of Uzbekistan's actions, government officials, experts and ordinary citizens argued for ending Kyrgyzstan's reliance on Uzbek gas. For instance, in 2011, Azamat Arapbaev, Chairman of the Committee on Fuel and Energy Complex and Subsoil Use of the Supreme Council of Kyrgyzstan at the time, stated that Tashkent was using gas exports as leverage:

Uzbekistan, being a gas supplier, uses it as leverage to put pressure on Kyrgyzstan. And even though Kyrgyzstan has

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<sup>21</sup> Exports increased from 249 million cubic meters (mcm) in 2017 to 335.3 million cubic meters (mcm) in 2021. Sourced from <https://www.stat.kg/>

electricity, its switch is in Uzbekistan. Unfortunately, during the reign of [Prime Minister Daniar] Usonov, gas prices for Kyrgyzstan were linked to global [oil] prices, so they are constantly changing for us (Kasymbekov, 2011).

The calls culminated in Kyrgyzstan signing the agreement with Gazprom and eventually resulted in Russia supplanting Uzbekistan as the main gas supplier. As a result, Uzbekistan has been deprived of an important leverage, further reducing its bargaining power. It is ironic that it was Uzbekistan's own actions such as frequent gas cuts that partly led Kyrgyzstan to diversify its gas supply sources. This is an example of the process of domination influencing the hegemonic process itself (Roseberry, 1994), a topic that warrants further research.

### **Conclusion**

The case of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan demonstrates that a hydro-hegemonic framework can effectively explain Uzbekistan's revised policy framework. The case also supports Roseberry's argument that hegemonic relationships are not static but, rather, they are constantly revised and redefined. In the case of Uzbekistan, the country's bargaining power changed due to several major developments, including, internal challenges in the country and the neutralization of its gas leverage over its neighbors, which caused the country to come up with a new hegemonic project that was diametrically opposed to its previous discourse.

The case of Uzbekistan clearly demonstrates that when the power asymmetry in the management of water resources changes, hydro-hegemons are forced to revise their discourses. The stronger the changes in power asymmetry, the more radically a hydro-hegemon reworks its dominant discourse. However, a hydro-hegemon making a complete volte face in its discourse, as in the case of Uzbekistan, is an exception rather than the rule. Still, my argument that the hydro-hegemony framework is effective at explaining transboundary relations and changing discourses of riparian countries still holds. Uzbekistan's redefined discourse on transboundary water management is silent on the potential negative consequences of the Kambar-Ata 1 Dam. Instead, the new rhetoric is focused on cooperation, and, more importantly, meeting the region's energy

needs. Despite the revised discourse, Uzbekistan's reliance on agricultural water has not ended and the country's revised framework is simply a new hegemonic project. In the coming years, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan will have to continually revisit their dominant discourses as they try to balance the conflicting demands of irrigation and hydropower as well as the challenges posed by national interests, climate change, and increasing demand for water. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan face the added challenge of mobilizing foreign investment to complete their dam projects. Given the narrow scope of this paper and relatively limited data availability, I suggest that the implications of my findings need to be tested through further research, both in Central Asia and in other contexts of hydro-hegemony. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine in detail this issue, it is worth noting that over the past decades Kyrgyzstan has signed several deals with Russia to fund the construction of the Kambar Ata 1 Dam, although most of these agreements were later cancelled. Russia has also had several rounds of negotiations with Tajikistan on funding and constructing the Rogun Dam but has so far refrained from getting fully involved in the project.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Central Asian countries seem to be trying to hedge their reliance on Russia. China and the European Union see this as a chance to expand their influence in the region. The EU has already expressed interest in financing the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan (Guarascio & Pirnazarov, 2022). To date China has tended to invest primarily in downstream Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, but it might well get involved in the hydro projects of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In the summer of 2023, it was reported that Kyrgyzstan had signed a memorandum of understanding and an investment agreement with a group of Chinese companies to fund the Kazarman project, another ambitious endeavor of the Kyrgyz government to build four more hydropower plants on the Naryn River (Shambetov, 2023). However, if the history of Central Asia's dam projects is any indication, implementation, which is what ultimately matters, will be anything but easy.

In recent years, another country has entered the hydropolitics of Central Asia: Afghanistan. In 2022, the Taliban-run government started digging the Qosh Tepa Canal in the north of the country to divert the waters of the Amu Darya River. The war-torn country is not

party to any regional or international treaty on using transboundary river waters, and the ambitious project has understandably raised concern in Uzbekistan. As Uzbekistan works on its strategy to deal with this new challenge, a familiar and expected discourse is taking shape. In September 2023, President Mirziyoyev stated the following when speaking about the canal: “Its commissioning could radically change the water regime and balance in Central Asia” (Mirziyoyev, 2023). It very well could, meaning we can expect Uzbekistan to once again rework its hydro-hegemony.

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