



COOPERATION OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES ON THE ISSUE OF REVIVAL OF THE ARAL SEA

In 1960s the Aral Sea was the fourth largest sea in the world. However, over the years, the sea has been gradually shrinking, leading to one of the greatest global environmental catastrophes of the desiccation of the Aral Sea. Agricultural water withdrawal and construction of major dams is the main reason behind the water shortage in the Aral Sea basin. While some areas were historically irrigated, most of the irrigation areas have been a result of the USSR's intense agricultural practices in Central Asia. As part of the Soviet five-year plans, the irrigation area in the Aral Sea basin had increased from 4.5 million hectares (ha) in 1960 to 7 million ha in 1980. Since gaining their independence the irrigation area of the Central Asian states have not changed significantly. Currently, the area equipped for irrigation occupies 8.4 million ha. By the early 1980s only 7 cubic kilometers (km³) out of an estimated total of 118.43 km³ of water reached the Aral Sea, while the rest was used up for irrigation purposes. Over 90% of the agricultural area in the Aral Sea Basin is artificially watered. Therefore, only small amount of water reaches the Aral Sea, which exacerbates the issue of desiccation of the sea and attracts attention of the entire world.

Even though the Aral Sea basin includes all Central Asian states and is fed by two major rivers in the region, Syr Darya and Amu Darya that mainly originate in the territories of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the sea itself is divided between two Central Asian states, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Therefore, cooperation between these two states on water issues is important, especially since the Aral Sea is not a single water body anymore, nowadays there are two parts of the sea: Northern, located on the territory of Kazakhstan (Small Aral) and larger Southern part located in Uzbekistan (Large Aral).

In 2005 Kazakhstan in cooperation with the World Bank built an eight-mile long Kokaral dam in order to trap water from the Syr Darya River within the Small Aral and to restore the water level of the sea. The project, which cost \$64 million has proven itself to be efficient. As a result of the project, the water level in the Small Aral has increased from 38 to 42 meters above the sea level, while the volume of water has increased from 15 to 27 cubic kilometers. The shoreline has also shifted from 100 km to 12 km away from the Aral town. The project even reinstated fishery in the sea. It has been reported that since the beginning of the first phase of the North Aral Project exports of fish products have increased by 3.6 times. The economy of the local population has highly suffered from the situation at the Aral Sea. Therefore, restora-

tion of the water level and fish species is crucial for economic recovery of the Kyzylorda region.

Meanwhile, the situation in the Large Aral has deteriorated even further. The Large Aral Sea split into two separate lobes: the deeper western lobe and the shallower and unstable eastern lobe. While the water level at the western lobe fluctuates seasonally depending on the amount of precipitation and the groundwater discharge, the eastern lobe disappeared in 2014. While some believe that the main reason behind the situation at the Large Aral is inefficient irrigation practices run by the government of Uzbekistan, some critics argue that it was the Kokaral dam, which had negatively affected the Large Aral leading to further lowering of water in this half of the sea. It is important to maintain water level of the western lobe in order to preserve the ecological system. Meanwhile, it is also crucial to restore the water level of the eastern lobe.

Transboundary water cooperation between the upstream (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and the downstream (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) countries is essential in order to overcome the catastrophe. The countries have been putting efforts towards joint actions on solving the issue of the Aral Sea since their independence. Moreover, international donor organizations are often involved in projects regarding water issues in the region.

In this light, firstly, the Agreement on Cooperation in the Management, Utilization and Protection of Interstate Water Resources was signed by the Central Asian states in 1992. The agreement was aimed at jointly solving the Aral Sea issues. The Interstate Commission for Water Management Coordination was established in the framework of the document in order to manage the issues related to the agreement. Also, the Agreement on Joint Actions for Addressing the Problems of the Aral Sea and its Coastal Area, Improving of the Environment and Ensuring the Social and Economic Development of the Aral Sea Region was signed in 1993. The coordination of the agreement was conducted by the newly established Interstate Council for the Aral Sea (ICAS). The funding was managed by the International Fund for the Aral Sea (IFAS), which includes all five countries and is put forward by the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. A long term Concept and a short term Program, both targeted towards solution of the Aral Sea crisis, were adopted in 1994. The Agreement on Joint Actions to Address the Problems of the Aral Sea and Socio-Economic Development of the Aral Sea basin was signed in 1996 by the same five independent countries. The two

organizations ICAS and IFAS were joined into IFAS to implement the Aral Sea Basin Program and was managed by the Deputy Prime Ministers of the Central Asian countries. One of the main goals of the agreement is to increase the water inflow into the Aral Sea. Recently, in the framework of the Summit of the Central Asian Heads of State held in April 2009, a number of agreements and memorandums on transboundary water issues were adopted by the Executive Committee of the IFAS. A draft of the third Aral Sea Basin Program (ASBP-3) with a total cost of \$2.5 billion was prepared in the course of the Summit and the final version was adopted in 2012. The project is aimed at an improvement of the livelihood of the local population while considering interests of all Central Asian states.

Besides, the Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Program for the Aral Sea Basin was approved by the World Bank in November 2015. The program is aimed to improve regional cooperation in coping with climate change. The first phase of the project financed by the World Bank was initially planned to be implemented in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Activities of the second phase were planned to be implemented in the remaining Central Asian states, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. However, the bank approved an allocation of funds worth \$38 million from the International Development Association, \$9 million of which is allocated to Tajikistan, \$14 million to Uzbekistan and \$15 million to other regional activities, omitting Kyrgyzstan from participation in the first phase of the program.

Despite the numerous efforts on restoring the Aral Sea by the means of water cooperation between the Central Asian countries, not much progress has been reached. Some believe that the lack of regional coordination, while implementing the projects, is one of the main reasons behind the failure to achieve successful results. Even though there are various international organizations assisting the Central Asian states to improve the water management system, a common center that could systematically manage, monitor and enforce water management laws, regulations and projects does not exist. Duplication of efforts and as a result, reduced effectiveness of programs, and inadequate distribution of funds are some of the examples of consequences of weak enforcement mechanisms. It can be concluded that in order to restore the Aral Sea it is important for the Central Asian states to cooperate on the transboundary water issues and to coordinate the efforts.

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Politics, Foreign Affairs and Security

- The Senate of Uzbekistan adopted a Law on Parliamentary control to enhance Parliament's role in the governmental system. According to the Chairman of the Senate's Committee on Legislation and Judiciary Issues, Batyr Matmurov, the main purpose of the law was to create integral legislative system on implementation of parliamentary control over execution of requirements of the Constitution and laws, and to improve efficiency and accountability of public authorities.
- Three major Ukrainian parliamentary parties, Petro Poroshenko Bloc, People's Front and Batkivshchyna (Fatherland), agreed to form a new coalition and to nominate the Speaker of Parliament, Vladimir Groisman, as a new Prime Minister.
- During his official visit to Central Asia, the Chairperson-in-Office of the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Foreign Minister of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, held talks with political leaders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan discussing the core aspects of the OSCE's work such as the fight against terrorism, regional cooperation, and economic connectivity in the OSCE area.
- As a result of the United Nations' (UN) Nuclear Security Summit held in Washington, the participants adopted a joint Communiqué, as well as an Action Plan in support of the UN.
- The Press Secretary of the Ukrainian envoy to the Contact Group, Dari Olifer, stated that new transport checkpoint Zolotoye had been opened in Donbass on the contact line between the self-proclaimed Lugansk People's Republic and Kiev-controlled part of the Lugansk region.
- The Spokesman of the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan, Vagif Dyaryakhly, reported that the situation along the line of contact in the zone of the Nagorno-Karabakh had deteriorated dramatically. Currently, clashes between the parties continue in the Terter, Agderinsky and Fizuli directions.
- The Ministry of Defense of Russia reported that units of Russia's Airborne Forces and Belarusian special forces had begun joint exercises in the Central Military District of Russia. According to the ministry, two battalion tactical groups fulfilling tasks in different directions under the

general command have been formed within the exercise framework.

Economy, Finance and Energy

- Azerbaijan's state oil company SOCAR stated that it would additionally produce over 6,900 tons of oil and 6.2 million cubic meters of gas daily as a result of a commissioning of the well at the offshore Oil Rocks field.
- According to the Ministry of Oil and Gas of Turkmenistan, Malaysian company Petronas Carigali will soon start drilling the first well on the Garagol Deniz West field located in the Turkmen sector of the Caspian Sea. Currently, construction of a pipeline from the Garagol Deniz West field to the gas treatment plant and the ground gas terminal located on the sea coast is nearing completion.
- According to the Iranian Ports and Maritime Organization, the unloading of oil products from the Caspian littoral states at Iran's Caspian ports decreased significantly in the first quarter of 2016. Iran unloaded 112,569 tons of oil products at Neka, Anzali, Fereidoon Kenar and Amirabad ports located on the Caspian coast in the first quarter of 2016 as opposed to 175,679 tons in the same period of 2015.
- Russian Gazprom and Belgian Fluxys signed a framework agreement on cooperation in the market of small-scale LNG facilities in Europe. The document reflects intentions of the parties to interact in implementation of joint construction and operation projects on LNG receiving terminals, LNG refueling sites and LNG bunkering infrastructure in the European nations.
- The Vice President of Russia's pipeline operator Transneft, Sergey Andronov, stated that China had confirmed its readiness to import around 27 million tons of Russian oil in 2016. According to him, 16.5 million tons will be delivered via the Skovorodino – Mohe pipeline, 7 million tons will be supplied across Kazakhstan and around 3.5 million tons will be exported within the intergovernmental agreement via the port of Kozmino.
- The Minister of Energy of Armenia, Levon Yolyan, informed about Iran's intention to resume financing of the gas distribution network in two Armenian towns, Megri and Agarak, located not far from the border with Iran. The project suspended in 2013 will be financed by the Iranian gov-

ernment, which will disburse a \$2 million grant.

- The President of Azerbaijan's state oil company SOCAR, Rovnag Abdullayev, informed about the plans of the shareholders of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) project to raise additional \$2 billion from international finance institutions before late 2016 for a period of 20 years at very low interest rates in order to fund the project.
- According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, within the framework of the Turkmen – Russian business forum held in Ashgabat, companies and economic entities of Turkmenistan and Russia have signed documents on bilateral cooperation in the fields of construction and agriculture.
- Russian national statistics agency, Rosstat, reported that the GDP of the country had declined by 3.7% in 2015 compared to 2014. Russia's GDP mounted to 80.8 trillion rubles (\$1.2 trillion) in current prices in 2015.
- According to the Statistics Committee of the Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan, inflation measured on the customer price index stood at 3% in January-March 2016. Prices for foodstuffs, non-food goods and paid services in the country rose by 3.2%, 2.6% and 3.1% respectively.

Society and Culture

- During the regular parliamentary meeting, the Majlis of Turkmenistan adopted a law on freedom of religion and religious organizations, which should guarantee freedom of religion and belief, and ensure equal rights to every person, regardless of his/her religious beliefs.
- The Government of Russia has allocated grant funds in the amount of \$2 million for the project of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization aimed at the development of production industries in the Issyk-Kul province of Kyrgyzstan.
- According to the Head of the Reshetnev Information Satellite Systems Company, Nikolay Testoyedov, the testing of the ground control system of the Glonass satellite navigation system has been completed. Glonass is a satellite navigation system, which offers an alternative to the US Global Positioning System (GPS) by providing real-time positioning and speed data for surface, sea and airborne objects around the globe.