



THE ARAL SEA: IS RECOVERY STILL POSSIBLE?

The Aral Sea used to be the world's fourth largest lake but has lost 90% of its volume since 1960s due to the Soviet Union's massive water diversion and irrigation activities, mainly for cotton production. It is now one of the world's largest man-made ecological disasters as the desiccation of the sea and the resulting desertification have led to the degradation of land resources, the deterioration of biological diversity, and enormous social and economic losses, as well as serious health related effects for the local population. In particular, dust storms containing toxic salt and harmful chemical compounds from the dried bottom damaged not only adjacent areas but also territories as far as Russia's Arctic north, while shipping and fishing on the sea, which split into two parts, Northern (Small) Aral Sea and Southern (Large) Aral Sea, stopped entirely.

In March 1993, the five states of Central Asia established the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) to deal with the environmental crisis and address its social and economic consequences. With support from the UN, the World Bank and donor countries, the IFAS was initially quite active as it was responsible for coordinating the national and international assistance programs targeting the Aral Sea region. Acknowledging its role, in December 2008, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution granting the observer status to the fund. However, due to disagreements between the regional countries and their differing water use and management policies, cooperative efforts on saving the sea, mitigating environmental risks and promoting sustainable development in the Aral Sea basin gradually faded away, being replaced by unilateral measures.

In this regard, Kazakhstan's activities on reviving the North Aral Sea were most successful. In 2005, in partnership with the World Bank, Kazakhstan constructed a 12 km-long dyke, the Kokaral dam, across the narrow channel that connects the northern and southern parts of the sea to reduce the amount of water spilling out into the South Aral Sea. Along with the construction of the Koksarai counter regulator and large-scale improvements of the riverbed in the lower basin of the Syrdarya river, the Kokaral dam allowed boosting the flow of water into the North Aral Sea. The increase in water levels and the decrease in water salinity led to the rehabilitation of the northern part of the sea,

which returned within 20 km from the former port town of Aral'sk, and to the revival of the fishing industry in Kazakhstan's Aral Sea region, providing employment for the local population and even opening opportunities for fish exports.

However, in the absence of efforts from other countries of the region, the main southern part of the Aral Sea kept shrinking. Uzbekistan continued to use water for irrigation and did not conduct active work to restore the South Aral Sea, and Tajikistan was preoccupied by the construction of the Rogun hydropower plant on the Vakhsh river, a tributary of the Amudarya river. Turkmenistan launched a project to create the Altyn Asyr (Golden Age) Lake in the Karakum desert, withdrawing water from the Amudarya river basin, while Kyrgyzstan declared in 2016 that it would cease its participation in IFAS activities since the organization "does not take into account the hydro-power aspects of water use and the needs of individual Central Asian states".

Therefore, the summit of the heads of the IFAS founding states, including the leader of Kyrgyzstan who participated as an honorary guest, held in Turkmenbashi on August 24, 2018, can be perceived as a real breakthrough. It was the first such meeting since the April 2009 summit in Almaty, and there is a hope that it will give momentum to renewed regional cooperation on the Aral Sea issue. According to the joint communique adopted at the conclusion of the summit, the parties reaffirmed their commitment to previous decisions on joint and integrated management and rational use of water resources and environmental protection in the Aral Sea basin, taking into account the interests of all countries of the region and based on the principles of good neighborliness and mutual respect. The regional leaders emphasized the similarity of their approaches to solving common water, environmental and socio-economic issues related to the Aral Sea crisis, stressed the need to take concerted measures and noted the importance of developing the fourth phase of the program of assistance to the Aral Sea basin countries. They also supported Turkmenistan's initiative to adopt a special UN program for the Aral Sea basin countries, which is intended to provide an integrated approach to solving the Aral Sea crisis with the broad participation of all stakeholders.

The IFAS in its current format is not efficient, therefore the presidents of the five

countries expressed their readiness to further improve the organizational structure and legal framework of the fund in order to create an effective and sustainable institutional mechanism capable of responding to new challenges in a timely manner. It should also fully ensure mutually beneficial cooperation in the implementation of regional projects and programs aimed at saving the Aral Sea and ecological rehabilitation of the Aral Sea basin, as well as at integrated use and protection of water resources. A regional working group was formed to address this issue, and its next meeting will take place in Turkmenistan in May 2019.

It is early to say if the reload of commitments of the Central Asian states to cooperate in saving the Aral Sea will produce real results. Currently, Kazakhstan implements at its own expense the second phase of the project on the regulation of the Syrdarya riverbed and the preservation of the northern part of the Aral Sea that would allow bringing the Northern Aral Sea closer to Aral'sk. Uzbekistan adopted the program of the development of the Aral region for 2017-2021 aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions in the country's areas affected by the ecological disaster. The Uzbek side also performs mass planting of saxaul and other salt-tolerant plants on the dried bottom of the Southern Aral Sea, which is now called Aralkum, to prevent dust storms and partially restore local flora and fauna. At the same time, other regional countries need to demonstrate their willingness to contribute to solving the Aral Sea issue. For now, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan continue to implement their ambitious projects, such as Altyn Asyr and Rogun, while Kyrgyzstan is still to fully restore its participation in the IFAS. Theoretically, it is possible to bring the Aral Sea back to its former size, but in reality it will require hundreds of billions of dollars and unequivocal support not only from the Central Asian states, but also the entire global community. Instead of spending resources for such a futile purpose, the regional governments should focus their efforts on reducing existing and potential negative impact of the Aral Sea crisis. It is in the interest of all the countries of the region to mitigate its consequences by better coordinating their activities and implementing rational and responsible water use and management practices based on best experiences found in other transboundary water basins around the world.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- During his state visit to Kyrgyzstan, President of Russia Vladimir Putin met with his Kyrgyz counterpart Sooronbay Jeenbekov. As a result of the talks, the parties signed bilateral agreements worth more than \$6 billion. They also agreed to expand the area of the Russian air base in Kant by 0.6 square km and increase its annual rent from \$4.5 million to \$4.79 million.
- The 7th meeting of the Turkish-Russian Joint Strategic Planning Group, a sub-mechanism of the Turkish-Russian High Level Cooperation Council, was held in Antalya. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov had a comprehensive exchange of views on bilateral, regional and international issues, including the situation in Syria.
- Following their first formal bilateral meeting in Vienna, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan underlined the importance of building up an environment conducive to peace and taking further concrete and tangible steps to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. Both sides assessed the meeting positively and pledged to continue talks.
- During his visit to China, Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Beibut Atamkulov held talks with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi and Vice President Wang Qishan. The parties shared views on a number of international topics and discussed pressing matters of political, economic and humanitarian cooperation between Kazakhstan and China, including the issue of ethnic Kazakhs residing in Xinjiang.
- The Council of Border Troops Commanders of the CIS member states held its meeting in Tashkent to agree joint measures necessary to neutralize threats to border security, especially in the Central Asian region. The participants also discussed the draft program on cooperation between the CIS countries to strengthen external border security for 2021-2025.
- As a result of the presidential election in Ukraine, no candidate received an absolute majority of the vote. Volodymyr Zelensky won the first round with 30.61%, incumbent president Petro Poroshenko gained 16.15%, and former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko gathered 13.56%. Zelensky and Poroshenko will compete in the second round of voting on April 21, 2019.
- During a ceremony held in Lebanon, 120 Kazakh peacekeepers were awarded with the UN 'In the Service of Peace' medal for their contribution to the organization's peacekeeping mission in this country. Kazakhstan's military unit joined the UN Interim Force in Lebanon in October 2018 and will be replaced by the second group of peacekeepers in April 2019.

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- The first passenger train was launched in test mode along the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, which is currently used for cargo transportation only. The train, made by the Swiss company Stadler for Azerbaijan Railways, came from Switzerland to Istanbul and then traveled to Baku via Georgia. A commercial passenger service is expected to start in the third quarter of 2019.
- The Task Force on Regional Energy Cooperation in Central and South Asia held its 15th meeting in Ashgabat. The representatives of relevant government agencies and energy companies from Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as international and regional organizations, attended the event to discuss projects aimed at promoting cross-border energy trade and regional energy security.
- Chairman of the Management Committee and Deputy Chairman of the Board of Directors of Gazprom Alexei Miller visited Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. In Ashgabat, he met with President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov to continue talks on the resumption of Turkmen gas purchases by Gazprom. In Bishkek, Miller negotiated with Prime Minister Mukhammedkaliy Abylgaziev on the renovation of the country's gas transmission and distribution network.
- The Asian Development Bank approved a \$100 million financing package to modernize aging equipment and improve power generation capacity at the Uch-Kurgan hydropower plant. The bank's funds, consisting of a \$60 million loan and a \$40 million grant from the Asian Development Fund, will help Kyrgyzstan to strengthen energy self-sufficiency and increase potential for energy exports to neighboring countries.
- During his visit to the United Arab Emirates, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev held talks with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. The parties signed documents worth more than \$10 billion on cooperation in the areas of investment, finance, alternative energy, industrial and infrastructural development, agriculture, and customs administration.
- The Mongolian government delegation visited the Russian city of Ulan-Ude to take part in the Mongolia-Russia business forum called 'Baikal Trade 2019', as part of which 22 Mongolian companies displayed their export products. The parties agreed to expand mutual cooperation in the sectors of transport, energy and environment.
- The Chinese company TBEA plans to start developing the Upper Kumarg gold mine in the Sughd region of Tajikistan in the second half of 2019. The company will use profits from gold mining to reimburse money it invested in the construction of a thermal power plant in Dushanbe. The plant's cost was \$349 million, of which \$17.4 million was spent by the Tajik government.

Society and Culture

- In Ankara, the Turkish government and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs jointly organized a seminar on the interaction of the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan within a multilateral system of humanitarian assistance. The event's main goal was to facilitate experience exchange in the field of humanitarian assistance under bilateral and multilateral formats.
- The first training course for Tajik and Afghan female rescuers was held in Dushanbe, as part of efforts to expand cross-border cooperation between Tajikistan and Afghanistan on disaster preparedness and response to emergency situations. During a week-long event, the participants learned methods of search-and-rescue operations with the use of special equipment.
- The U.S. Labor Department removed Uzbek cotton from the list of goods that are produced with forced child labor. According to the department's conclusion, "the use of forced child labor in the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan has been significantly reduced to isolated incidents". In 2018, the Uzbek government took a number of measures aimed at banning forced labor.
- The first public brainstorming themed "The Path from Torture to the Service Model: Recommendations from Civil Society to the Ministry of Internal Affairs" took place in Bishkek. During the event organized under the project of the Penal Reform International office in Kyrgyzstan, representatives of government agencies and civil society discussed measures aimed at eradicating torture in the country.
- Georgia became the first country in the South Caucasus to sign an agreement with Eurojust, the EU agency dealing with judicial cooperation in criminal matters among relevant agencies of 28 EU member states. The agreement signed in the Hague enables Georgia and the EU member states cooperate more effectively in the fight against organized and transnational crime.
- TURKSOY, in cooperation with the Embassy of Turkey in Belgium and with contribution from the embassies of the Central Asian states, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan, organized traditional Nowruz celebrations in Brussels. The event featured colorful stands introducing traditional garments, cuisine and handicrafts, as well as a concert of artists from the Turkic World.
- According to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, it is possible that the legal status of the Hagia Sophia Museum, a landmark of Istanbul and a UNESCO World Heritage site, can be changed to a mosque as it was before 1935. In such a case, the entrance to Hagia Sophia for all visitors and worshippers would be free of charge, similar to other historical mosques in Istanbul.