

## **Recent Border Clash between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and Its Implications on Regional Cooperation in Central Asia**

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### **Background of Issue**

On 28 April 2021 at the Golovnaya water area of the Kyrgyz-Tajik state border near the village of Kok-Tash in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, tensions occurred between the local residents of the two countries, which rapidly escalated into an armed clash between the military forces of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Shootings in the Batken and Leilek districts of the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan continued on April 30 and May 1. Finally on May 1, the parties managed to agree on a complete ceasefire and the withdrawal of forces from the border areas. During the four-day conflict, 36 people from the Kyrgyz side were killed, 183 were injured and about 50,000 people fled the areas of violence<sup>1</sup>. According to the country's Ministry of Emergency Situations, 220 houses and objects were destroyed in Kyrgyz villages<sup>2</sup>. Bishkek accused the Tajik side for the emergence of violent clashes in border region. May 1-2 in Kyrgyzstan were declared days of national mourning.

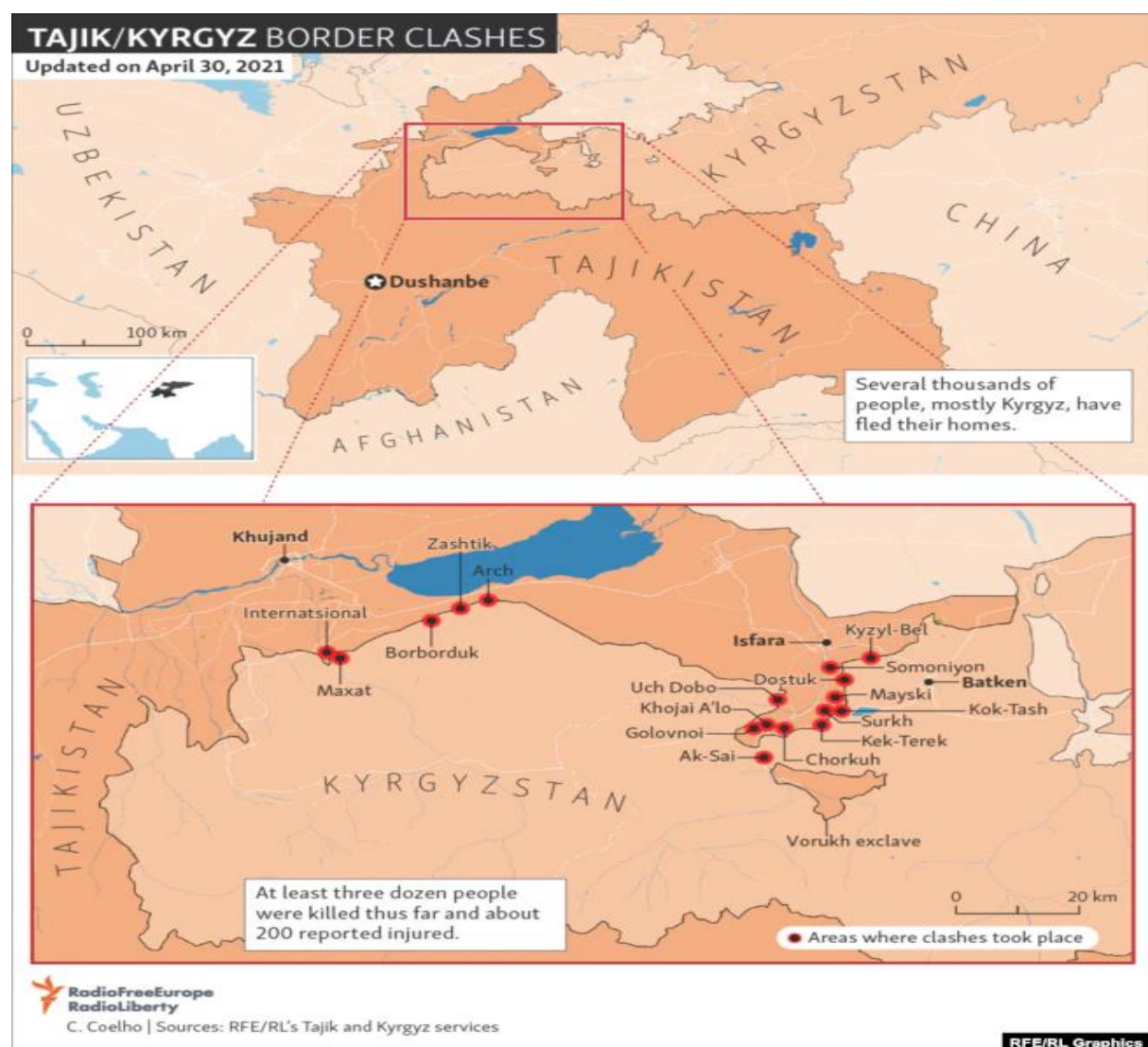
In return, the Prosecutor General's Office of Tajikistan opened criminal probes against members of the Kyrgyz military and armed civilians over the violence underlining that 200 Kyrgyz army servicemen and civilians, who began throwing stones, escalated unrest that resulted in an exchange of gunfire<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, Tajik officials emphasised that during these clashes "a large number of homes, border installations, other sites, and infrastructure facilities were destroyed"<sup>4</sup>. According to the press service of the Sughd region of Tajikistan, 19 Tajik citizens became victims of the conflict, 87 people were injured<sup>5</sup>.

Presidents and ministers of foreign affairs of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had bilateral phone talks to discuss the ongoing violence and further steps to ease the difficult situation. Moreover, being concerned with further proliferation and widening of the conflict the presidents and ministers of foreign affairs of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia and OSCE Chairperson-in-Office conducted several phone talks with their Kyrgyz and Tajik counterparts persuading them to deescalate the conflict and to establish ceasefire between the opposing sides.

Based on these diplomatic efforts and also taking into account substantial number of victims and destructions from both sides on May 1, the heads of the Tajik and Kyrgyz State Committees for National Security signed protocols on a ceasefire and the withdrawal of troops<sup>6</sup>. Kyrgyz official declared that two countries found a common understanding on several border issues and the

controversial border's 112 kilometres should be agreed by Bishkek and Dushanbe by May 9<sup>7</sup>.

However, there was no considerable advancement on negotiations between the sides in the following several weeks after the signing of documents on ceasefire. Therefore, on May 21 the Kyrgyz authorities decided to impose restriction on Tajik citizens entering, transiting its territory and they also closed the passage and transportation of goods across multiple land crossings between the countries<sup>8</sup>. On June 4, the situation on the Kyrgyz-Tajik state border again aggravated while both sides accused each other on breaching earlier agreements<sup>9</sup>. After negotiations between the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan they agreed to withdraw additional forces and means to the places of permanent deployment and again to deescalate the situation on the border areas. Finally, the presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met in person in Dushanbe at the end of June 2021 to discuss the border problems behind closed doors bilaterally. They reiterated mutual commitment to good neighbourly relations and to continue constructive talks on border issues.



### **The underlying reasons of border clashes**

The length of the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is 976 km, of which only 504 km are delimited and demarcated despite regular negotiations during 180 meetings of the joint commission and various working groups started in 2002<sup>10</sup>. Almost every year, conflicts occur between residents of border areas from neighbouring countries over disputed areas. There are several reasons of the protracted negotiations on border demarcation and absence of progress on this path

**1. The disputed areas are very important for the both sides in terms connectivity, providing the access to the territories of the countries and access to the vital water supply sources.** The conflict zone includes a strategic road that connects the Tajik exclave of Vorukh to the country's main territory. At the same time another road which crosses a disputed area of the border is the only link between Kyrgyzstan's Leilek district and the rest of the country<sup>11</sup>. Golovnaya water distribution point, located on the Isfara River is also in the contested area involving a number of tensions between local Kyrgyz and Tajik communities<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, the negotiations on delimitation and demarcation of borders in such complex areas are facing many problems as neither of sides is ready to transfer vitally important infrastructure and resources to the neighbour.

**2. The difficult course of the negotiations is due to the fact that each side, when determining the borders, is guided by Soviet maps of different years, insisting on favourable terms for themselves.** Considering that the borders of the two Soviet socialist republics have changed several times since 1924, it is obvious to get lost in cartographic intricacies. During negotiations on border delimitation Tajikistan operates with maps from 1924-1939 and the Kyrgyz Republic with a map from 1958-1959<sup>13</sup>.

**3. The negative consequences of the climate change and demographic blast.** Lack of water and land resources are pushing new generations of people who have grown up in close proximity to a shaky border in survival and defending territories perceived as "their owned". The demand for scarce water resources in border area is increasing with the growth of the population. At the same time, the frequency of severe droughts in the region is rising making Central Asia one of the most affected regions by climate change. This development is deteriorating the relations between local Tajik and Kyrgyz communities on permanent disputes over fair and just sharing of water resources both for personal and irrigation usage. Furthermore, pasture resources are getting scarcer every year due to population increases among both border communities as well as limited productivity caused by climatic conditions of the rangelands<sup>14</sup>.

### **Implication of the border conflict on regional cooperation in Central Asia**

This border instability has brought many victims and has affected on freezing of trade, economic, political and people-to-people connections between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Such negative development of bilateral relations

between Bishkek and Dushanbe might have the following implications for the region

1. Starting from 2017 regional countries could gradually improve the relations between Central Asian countries and initiated desecuritization of the most sensitive regional issues like water and border disagreements. Based on this growing positive atmosphere, Central Asian nations even could establish purely intraregional cooperation platform like regular consultative meetings of the presidents. Despite not having any legally binding foundation, this platform is extremely important for further deepening of regional cooperation and coordinating policies on regionally significant issues. However, such violent clashes between CA nations can potentially lead to aggravation of the current positive environment in the region constructed due to the active position of new leadership in Uzbekistan.

2. Disunity and lack of mutual trust in the region during the period of Western forces withdrawal from Afghanistan and rising uncertainty on security situation in this country after the end of this leave might complicate the collective regional response to the possible emergence of security threat and challenges to Central Asia from Afghanistan. The accelerated withdrawal of international coalition troops from Afghanistan motivated active attempts by the Taliban to turn the tide in their favour with active offensive operations in various provinces of the country. This development has led to the observed stagnation in the peace negotiation process between the Afghan government and the Taliban movement in Doha after their launch in September 2020 and demonstrate the impossibility of quickly finding compromise solutions between the warring parties.

3. Lack of trust and regional incompetence in solving such sensitive issues as border disputes could stimulate active involvement of powerful external actors. Incapability to find compromise decisions on border demarcation and sharing vital water and land resources, existing infrastructure might considerably advance the role of Russia, China, Turkey and other powerful countries as mediators and security guarantees in Central Asia restricting the sovereign development of regional countries. Finding intraregional solutions, coordination of national policies on responding to the growing security threats and challenges could strengthen independence and resilience of the region.

### **What is next?**

The situation on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border area is still highly strained. The memories of the recent brutal confrontation are still fresh, so any new incident in these border areas may potentially produce new wave of large-scale violent clashes between the sides. Especially considering the fact that many representatives of both sides are still continuing to appeal to the irrational rhetoric of calling disputed border areas as traditional historical territories of each other, so reinforcing nationalist moods in the countries and complicating the possibility

of land plots' exchange to solve border conflict. At the same time, taking into account economic problems and level of underdevelopment of both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan extended violent conflict could have significantly harmful impact on their further progress and even deplete the available limited resources of these countries.

Unfortunately, it seems that the ongoing conflict will not be solved in a short-term period. Probably both countries are not ready in the current realities to make important and long-term political decisions on border issues. Despite this it is vitally important for the conflict sides to continue primarily bilateral discussions trying to find mutual understanding on these sensitive border disputes. The lack of regular interaction between Bishkek and Dushanbe can cause additional provocations in these argued territories. The external actors like Russia and Turkey might be interested in significant involvement in the further negotiations between Bishkek and Dushanbe gaining additional leverage in Central Asia. However, in case the conflict sides will need facilitation, the active position of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan can keep regional agency in such complicated problems and strengthen regional cooperation. These countries should have more active involvement in the solution of such disputes in Central Asia, if there is an appeal from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to the regional countries in supporting and advancing their negotiations on border disputes.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Putz. Violent Clashes at the Troublesome Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border. // The Diplomat, 4 May 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/violent-clashes-at-the-troublesome-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-border/>

<sup>2</sup> Kyrgyzstan: Border Conflict. // International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 14 May 2021. <https://adore.ifrc.org/Download.aspx?FileId=412556>

<sup>3</sup> Tajikistan concedes deaths in border clashes with Kyrgyzstan. // France24, 3 May 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210503-tajikistan-concedes-deaths-in-border-clashes-with-kyrgyzstan-1>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Tajikistan Says 19 Dead in Border Clashes with Kyrgyzstan. // The Defense Post, 6 May 2021. <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/05/06/tajikistan-19-dead-kyrgyzstan-clashes/>

<sup>6</sup> Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan agree ceasefire after border clashes. // Reuters, 1 May 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kyrgyzstan-accuses-tajikistan-amassing-troops-near-border-2021-05-01/>

<sup>7</sup> Bahtiyar Abdülkerimov. Death toll rises to 55 from Kyrgyz-Tajik border clashes. // Anadolu Agency, 5 May 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/death-toll-rises-to-55-from-kyrgyz-tajik-border-clashes/2230340#>

<sup>8</sup> Ayzirek Imanaliyeva. Kyrgyzstan turns back Tajik nationals as tensions persist. // Eurasianet, 26 May 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-turns-back-tajik-nationals-as-tensions-persist>

<sup>9</sup> Fozil Mashrab. Border Conflict Compels Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Look for Foreign Weapons. // The Jamestown Foundation, 21 June 2021. <https://jamestown.org/program/border-conflict-compels-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan-to-look-for-foreign-weapons/>

<sup>10</sup> Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan expected to outline 112 kilometers of disputed area by May 9. // Asia-Plus, 3 May 2021. <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/incidents/20210503/tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan-expected-to-outline-112-kilometers-of-disputed-area>

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<sup>11</sup> Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan agree ceasefire after border clashes. // Reuters, 1 May 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kyrgyzstan-accuses-tajikistan-amassing-troops-near-border-2021-05-01/>

<sup>12</sup> Kyrgyzstan says 31 killed in clashes at Tajikistan border. // Al Jazeera, 30 April 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/30/kyrgyzstan-says-31-killed-in-clashes-at-tajikistan-border>

<sup>13</sup> Gulzana Kurmanalieva. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Endless Border Conflicts. // EUCACIS Online Paper №4, February 2019. [https://www.cife.eu/Ressources/FCK/EUCACIS\\_Online%20Paper%20No%204%20-%20Kurmanalieva.pdf](https://www.cife.eu/Ressources/FCK/EUCACIS_Online%20Paper%20No%204%20-%20Kurmanalieva.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid