

## **The geopolitics of water in Uzbekistan: the eyes of a French geographer**

**First**, it is clear that in Uzbekistan, **water is scarce and threatened**.

Water resources naturally poorly distributed across the country are now rare. They come from two major river basins formed by the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, the two largest rivers in Central Asia that flow both in the Aral Sea. However, Uzbekistan is a Mesopotamia which has long set higher population densities than in the rest of Central Asia, although the percentage of useful land to agriculture does not exceed 10%.

The weakness of water resources explains that less than 10% of the land is cultivable Uzbekistan. Worse than that, the Aral Sea, fourth inland sea of the world has seen since the early 1960s, its volume of water divided by ten, and will reduce its size by 75%.

It is true that by 1988, the USSR had declared “disaster areas” adjacent territories that sea. Now, some provide its complete disappearance in 2025. But conversely, and fortunately, it seems according to some experts that the volume of the “small sea” has re-grown since 2007 and this faster than it had been expected.

**Secondly**, Uzbekistan, water is now **a national and international issue**. The major cause of degradation of water resources in Uzbekistan first proceeds of irrigation and watering the fields. The decrease of water resources is in fact due mainly to the use somewhat responsible for the very people who irrigate their fields too or let it evaporate in vain due to lack of adequate maintenance of irrigation channels. Moreover, in rural areas, water is contaminated by the poor condition of drainage channels and waste from agriculture as livestock.

But water is also an international issue. The President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov on the occasion of the 48th and 50th sessions of the UN General Assembly stated: “*The Aral crisis is one of the largest humanitarian disaster in the history of humanity, endangering the lives of tens of millions of people inhabiting the basin of the Aral Sea*”. Generally, all the water resources of Central Asian rivers are distributed within the “*patterns of use of water resources in river basins Syr Darya and Amu Darya*”.

Fortunately, the Central Asian states have agreed to build the sharing of water resources on the principle that all water resources in the basin of the Aral Sea are common and must be divided among States from a coordinated policy. This is especially critical, given that the Amu Darya and Syr Darya can not ensure that 70% of average annual requirements. This, of course, complicates the establishment of cooperative efforts to solve the problems of rational use of resources.

Thus, all decisions regarding the use of rivers, including hydro-energy buildings, should not be detrimental to ecology and harm the interests of people in downstream countries. To cite one example, the downstream areas of the Syr Darya and Amu Darya have now more than seven million people. International

law must be applied. This is why the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan had made 16 August 2007 under the Council of Heads of States members of the Organization of the Shanghai Cooperation, the following proposals:

- The use of water resources of transboundary rivers in Central Asia must necessarily take into account respect for the interests of 50 million people living in the region.

- No action taken on these transboundary rivers must not have negative consequences on the stability of water resources in the region.

- The UN Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, dated March 17, 1992, adopted by the General Assembly on May 21, 1997, must be the basis for building all systems of joint use of transboundary rivers.

- It is essential to ensure that construction of new hydroelectric plants will not have serious ecological consequences and will not violate the natural balance of the use of watercourse by all states located along these rivers.

- In case of damage, all appropriate measures shall be taken for its immediate cessation and compensation measures should be taken.

For all these reasons, the feasibility studies of new water facilities in the basins of transboundary rivers must undergo mandatory objective expertise on the part of international audit absolutely neutral. Investor countries, like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, should not forget the mandatory nature of these conditions.

**Thirdly**, these recommendations dictated by the simple reason that unfortunately are not unnecessary. Indeed, some neighbouring countries of Uzbekistan did not give up some huge dam projects, developed there nearly 40 years, in the midst of Soviet deception. Their achievements would generate ecological nightmares, not to mention that whole area is often subjected to very high earthquake on the Richter scale.

The dangers inherent in the construction of power plants are indeed considerable<sup>1</sup>. Most hydraulic and hydroelectric projects currently under consideration in Central Asia should be completely overhauled if not abandoned because they are mostly just as the former Soviet ideological follies as new races for the benefit certainly more contemporary. As each other can in no way justify the killing of an ecological whole region or the endangerment of hundreds of thousands of human beings for the sole satisfaction of being able to sacrifice in the myth of growth at any price.

To take an example, the proposed construction of the Rogun hydroelectric power from its inception has presented a dimension not only **problematic** but also **emblematic**.

**Problematic** insofar as the former Soviet great project that dates back nearly decades is obviously carrying huge risks.

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<sup>1</sup> Honorary director of the Institute of Seismology of the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan. Sabit Negmatullaev predicts powerful earthquakes in the Pamir Mountains in Tajikistan (Gindikushskom) over the next 10 years.

First, its implementation will have catastrophic consequences on the flow of the Amu Darya even as the agricultural potential of the territories bordering the river are already heavily encumbered by aridity and confidentiality of climate.

Then, the whole ecological balance of the region which is likely to be challenged with even more catastrophic consequences, that the environment of the sub-region has been battered and weakened in recent decades by the drastic shrinking of the Aral Sea. We know the pernicious role played by the establishment of grandiose water management policies designed by ideologues who believed that man could easily dominate any type of environment.

Finally, who could ignore that the settlement area of this plant is subject to earthquakes both strong and recurring? We can not imagine the economic and human damage could occur if new seismic activity resumed when we know they are common in this area. At this level, the implementation of the hydropower plant would fall Rogun simply the suicidal. The recent events in Japan are a clear proof.

**Emblematic**, insofar serious experts of the largest international organizations have had the courage to tell their concerns about the implementation of this program. It is also worth noting that some western technicians of private companies had shown the same courage in daring to talk about the dangerousness of the project while their companies had any financial interest in seeing it takes shape.

**In conclusion**, a very general way, just as many environmental disasters have come to remind officials that modern societies should spare the planet instead of plunder or destroy, international institutions as well as the world opinion can not but condemn projects harmful and dangerous to all the countries of Central Asia. No country can arrogate the right to receive water, this natural resource essential to life at the expense of its neighbours. Similarly, no country has the right to endanger the population, those of its neighbours under the pretext of making grandiose buildings, but dangerous because of unpredictable and difficult to measure whims of nature. The geopolitics of water in Uzbekistan is an issue. It is also the geopolitics of danger.

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