

BRIEFER

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Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan: Land and Water Conflicts

Svetlana Valieva

Lasting only an [hour](#), a cross-border [exchange of fire](#) (dubbed by some as the [first war of 2014](#)) occurred on the border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on January 11. The incident near the Vorukh settlement included the use of mortars and grenade launchers, with 8 border guards [wounded](#). Poor relations between the two neighboring states, exacerbated by an ongoing dispute over a partly-demarcated border, triggered the escalation. Both land and water are vital to the economies of the two poorest Central Asian states, and both sides fiercely defend their access to cropland and pastures.

The Vorukh border settlement is a Tajik enclave within the greater Batken Province of Kyrgyzstan. A single road runs through the village, connecting two regions of Kyrgyzstan and causing local residents to cross the Tajik border twice when traveling between the two regions. The hindrance to every-day life and economic activity brought about by the double border-crossing led the Kyrgyz government to [commence construction](#) of a road connecting the Kyrgyz villages of Kok-Tash and Aksai, aiming to bypass the Vorukh settlement, in the spring of 2013. However, the road would pass through disputed territory. Although, the Kyrgyz side [agreed](#) to suspend the construction of the road at the January 7th meeting on the delimitation and demarcation of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, the construction was resumed to the Tajik side's dismay.

The claims of illegality of construction lead to the escalation of tensions on January 11th.

The other reason for disagreement between the border areas of the two states is water – an important resource for the primarily agricultural economy of the Batken province. The skirmish took place near the main water supply point on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. Although [externally-mediated programs](#) on water management and transboundary cooperation exist, further cooperation is needed to solve the ongoing [disagreement](#) between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on water distribution rights in these border areas. Such cooperation is imperative, especially given the growing need to prepare for a changing climate, and the attendant increases in water stress that are likely to result.

The two states also share a common ground on regional water-energy issues, as both are located upstream of the major river basins in the region. The main flow of the Aral Sea Basin is formed on the territories of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and flow downstream to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This creates the possibility of additional interstate water disputes, and enhances incentives for regional and international actors to encourage the development of cooperative solutions.

Heightening concerns is the third dimension of this conflict – the security factor. Given Kyrgyzstan’s and Tajikistan’s current status as “failed states” and Tajikistan’s shared border with Afghanistan, fears of instability spill-over arising from the ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan are commonplace. Past military incursions by members of the al-Qaeda linked Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) occurred in the Batken province of Kyrgyzstan. The fighters launched their raids in 1999 – 2000 from the Karategin Valley (Rosht Valley) of Tajikistan until they were driven out in 2000. Despite these events and fears, a surge in religious extremism does not seem to amass to a real threat and may be contained by further cooperation on both sides.

The protracted instability in the region greatly affects cross-border communities. Compromise and reasonable political demands between the two governments are the only roads to cross-border cooperation. On January 13 the two sides took [steps](#) towards conflict resolution during [negotiations](#). It remains to be seen whether further cooperation, aimed at addressing the land and water dynamics at the heart of the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, will ensure.

Svetlana Valieva is a Research Fellow at the Center for Climate and Security, and an international development professional at the World Bank Development Group