

The conflicts on this part of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border have become chronic, but there is no progress in resolving this issue yet.

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The presidents of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are preparing for a meeting, during which issues of accelerating the demarcation and delimitation of the disputed parts of the joint border will be discussed. The exact date and place of the event is not reported by their representatives yet. It is known that Jeenbekov will travel to Tajikistan with a working visit, where negotiations on bilateral border cooperation are going to take place.

On the eve of this meeting on July 22 at the Aksay - Voruh area, another conflict occurred between the residents, which resulted in the death of one citizen of Tajikistan and hospitalization of wounded people from both sides, including police officers and border guards.

Since July 22, the Voruh - Isfara highway, which connects the Tajik enclave with its main territory, has been blocked by the residents of the Kyrgyz village of Aksay. In response, the military of Tajikistan blocked the Batken - Leilek highway, which passes through the territory of Tajikistan.

According to the results of the meeting of the heads of the border agencies and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the two republics, now, law enforcement agencies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are jointly patrolling the border, where the situation is stable.

On the Aksai-Voruh area, conflicts occur annually between local residents due to the absence of the clear borderline.

Despite the latest incident, the scheduled meeting of the two leaders will take place.

Below we present a commentary by a political scientist from Bishkek, Emil Juraev, prepared on this issue:



*The borderline left from the Soviet times, as if specially made so that later it would be impossible to divide it into two sides. Photo from cabar.asia archive*

In the southwestern region of Kyrgyzstan, which is wedged forward and therefore surrounded by the territory of Tajikistan, the local population lives in a state of duality. On the one hand, these communities are in close contact in everyday life, they share, so to speak, their daily bread, but on the other hand, it is in this area that conflicts occur most often, a large number of alarmed people are seen, and sometimes shooting can be heard. Will this duality end and will the neighbors heal in peace and harmony, without quarrels and mutual reproaches after the meeting of the presidents of the two countries?

It is unlikely that the alleged meeting of the presidents Sooronbai Jeenbekov and Emomali Rahmon in the town of Isfara (that is bordering Kyrgyzstan) will resolve all existing mutual claims and bring stable peace and harmony. However, where problems and anxiety are seen, there is always place for hope. There is big hope that this meeting may initiate a qualitatively different, more serious approach to resolving the border problems of the

region. Problems arose as soon as the two neighbors became sovereign states. With growing economic needs and a growing shortage of water, land and pasture resources, the problems only increased.

A detailed map of that corner of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan should be considered and felt: this is truly a difficult area, where Kyrgyz settlements invariably have to contact Tajik ones, and vice versa - where several villages of Tajikistan need to go through Kyrgyz territory in order to reach the rest of Tajikistan. There are difficult areas in the Batken region where Aksay - Voruh area is especially famous - and in Leilek region, where the border villages of Maksat, Arka and Kulundu find themselves in the center of clashes with their neighbors. In connection with the unresolved lines of the border between the two countries, as well as inconsistent principles for the use of common resources and infrastructure, and on the back of the residents' daily needs, it is not surprising that conflicts arise every once in a while.

The problems of this border region can be viewed from different angles. The most primary, but now already established fact, from which one cannot escape, is as a mosaic stretched line of the border left from the Soviet times, as if specially made so that later it would be impossible to divide it into two sides. At the same time, Soviet cartography has worked with the region several times, making, as a result, a map from the 1920s, which Tajikistan prefers, and a later a map from the 1950s and on, which Kyrgyzstan prefers. The most important mistake, probably, was not to address the issue of the establishment of borders at the very beginning of independence in the 1990s and not to simply agree that the borderlines in that region and in all other areas — would be established where they turned out to be in 1991. In principle, such an agreement did take place, but it was not detailed and was not specified on the ground, allowing serious complications to occur later, which in the early 1990s did not seem to be a problem.





Now, there are almost no realistic approaches to solving controversial issues along the borderline. Photo from cabar.asia archive

Secondly, having missed such an opportunity in those early years of independence, both countries, more precisely, the capitals and the leaders of both countries allowed themselves to be removed from the problems and challenges of these regions: the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan and the districts of the Soghd region of Tajikistan. The fact that President Rakhmon was going to visit the village of Voruh for the first time since 1993 speaks volumes. Although Voruh is a remote village, it obviously could not be simply forgotten – with a dense population of many thousands between the mountains, because with great regularity it becomes a hotbed of tension. This is the area that the parties are talking about and making agreements on during each intergovernmental meeting on border issues.

Bishkek did not forget about its villages in a remote region for so long, but it also leaves these areas of the Batken region with a lower level of attention, with a lower priority compared to larger areas. The Batken events of 1999 and 2000, because of which the Batken region itself was created, became a kind of an alarm clock and the authorities began to pay more attention to this area.

At the moment, there are almost no realistic approaches to solving controversial issues along the border line. Leaving everything as it is, just trying to agree meters and centimeters of the border and drawing the dividing line, even if it is conceivable - it means many controversial issues on water, roads, pastures and other needs that will remain and continue to arise.

To reconcile any exchange of territories, so that some villages can be completely relocated to new places and thus solve the issue of enclaves and other difficulties, is also an almost impossible option, entailing both cost and extreme resistance or dissatisfaction of the inhabitants affected by this exchange.

It would be extremely disadvantageous for Kyrgyzstan to allocate a small territory in order to give way to the village of Voruh to connect with the main territory of Tajikistan - and it would leave the conflict potential of this area as it is.

For a more complex and civilized resolution of the issue - so that the two countries and especially the residents of these areas do not need to line the borders, but live an interconnected, peaceful and good life, it will take even more. First, it is needed to ensure the economic and social development of these areas on a high level, to provide good quality of education, public and legal order, and the build the entire necessary infrastructure.





*An important mistake, which is observed very often in discussions of the problems in this region, is to think that with the delimitation and demarcation of the border line all current problems will be solved. Photo from cabar.asia archive.*

Such a civilized version seems almost the least possible. However, living in the border areas, where communities coexist tightly and closely together, should strive for this. An important mistake, which is observed very often in discussions of the problems in this region, is to think that with the delimitation and demarcation of the border line all current problems will be solved. In fact, the need for water, land, pastures, and roads will remain. Disputes and mutual demands will remain, but due to the fact that the borders will be formalized, it is possible that the tone and mood in the conflicts will become sharper, and have less compromise. Perhaps this will not happen and everything will become easier, but so far, there is no basis for believing in these ideas.

Therefore, whatever solution the two presidents may offer to each other and to the local communities in Batken and Isfara, they should understand that without the universal and tangible development of their regions, raising the living standards on both sides, more frequent visits and closer attention to these areas - it will be very difficult to ensure sustainable peace and good neighborliness in this place. For hopes to triumph over anxiety,

borders must become not so much a dividing line, but a zone of communication and friendship.

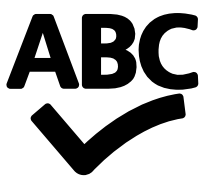
P.S. As they say, even before the ink was dry on this letter, as the sad news came again. At the point between the villages of Voruh and Aksai, people once again collided, used firearms, a dozen people on both sides suffered, and the situation remained tense, with blocked roads for both sides, waiting for a miracle from the meeting of the presidents. Ironically, the conflict happened precisely because of the expected arrival of the president to Voruh - the residents, diligently ennobling their village, decided to install the flag of their country at the entrance to the village on the point, which, as it turned out, is controversial and not outlined. In such a delicate matter as a controversial frontier, the establishment of the main state symbol of one side in a disputed place - or even close to that - is nothing more than a provocation. It is possible that the villagers did it without malicious intent, but in a fit of patriotism.

If in the early 1990s this element was not that vivid, or was less, over time, from aggravation to aggravation, with each victim, with each thrown stone and gunshot, both sides became more uncompromising, more strengthened in the sacralization of every inch, every centimeter of "their" land. Such sacralization and emotions, most often, lead to deep hostility and even enmity to the other side. Such an attitude, unfortunately, is especially strongly fueled by one-sided coverage of each case in the media of the two countries - each as they say blames the opposite side.

Establishing peace and resolving these disputes, therefore, will require not only technical work, or only economic, but also sociable: neighboring communities will have to learn to accept each other with respect and trust, and not as enemies.

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