

Russia Factor Shifts Kyrgyz-Uzbek Power Balance

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Kyrgyzstan's growing ties with Moscow give it added clout in region but could prove a liability.

Uzbekistan's continued refusal to resume natural gas supplies to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan ostensibly stems from a contractual dispute, but it is an open secret that it is about much more than that.

The Uzbeks have a longstanding objection to Kyrgyz hydroelectric schemes that could reduce their water supply. But some analysts see a second concern emerging – the resurgence of Russian influence in the region that the Uzbeks fear will work against their interests.

Gas-rich Uzbekistan halted supplies to southern Kyrgyzstan in mid-April after declining to renew the quarterly contract.

In the ongoing talks with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan is being represented by officials from Russian energy giant Gazprom, which acquired national distribution company KyrgyzGaz last year.

Insiders say that Uzbek negotiators initially said they just wanted to wait for the KyrgyzGaz takeover to be finalised, but later came up with other issues in a sign that the blockage was political rather than contractual.

“I can't tell you when this process will be over,” KyrgyzGaz spokesman Rysbek Arunov told IWPR. “Nor am I able to say when the gas issue will be resolved.”

KyrgyzGaz head Turgunbek Kumurzaev told parliament last month that decision-making power on the other side lay at a political level rather with the formal Uzbek negotiating partner, supply company UzGazTrans. He said the Uzbeks were linking the supply issue to broader matters like disputes over border territory, and Kyrgyzstan's Kambarata hydroelectric dam project, which they want halted.

Uzbekistan has long been a vocal opponent of Kambarata and of a similar dam project in Tajikistan as it fears they will limit or disrupt the flow of irrigation water essential to its farming sector.

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have had a difficult relationship since the Soviet collapse of 1991, and natural resources have often been the battleground. Much larger and richer in resources, Uzbekistan often had the upper hand. But renewed Russian influence in Central Asia – in Kyrgyzstan in particular – has shifted this dynamic.

Aside from the Gazprom investment, Moscow is backing the Kambarata project. Last year, Russian president Vladimir Putin signed off on a deal to provide technical and financial support for work on the hydroelectric scheme, and in February 2014 a further agreement set out terms for raising the funding.

Both Russian and Kyrgyz officials have attempted to calm fears about the implications for water levels in the Syr Darya river by inviting the downstream states – Kazakhstan as well as Uzbekistan – to acquire a stake in the Kambarata project. Tashkent has refused, and continues to raise objections on environmental and other grounds.

In May, Russia moved to facilitate Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Customs Union - see **[Kyrgyzstan Gets Soft Terms for Customs Union Entry](#)**.

Analysts say Russia's advance is unnerving Uzbekistan, which is beginning to realise that when dealing with Kyrgyzstan on bilateral issues, it will also have to reckon with Moscow.

“Uzbekistan wants to maintain its influence in the region, which it has been able to do because of its gas,” said Ainur Akmatalieva, a politics lecturer at the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavonic University in Bishkek. “With the arrival of Russia's Gazprom in Central Asia, it is emerging that Tashkent must negotiate with Moscow on foreign policy matters – something it doesn't like.”

In Uzbekistan, analysts insist that their government's fundamental concern is water, not Russia.

“It's highly likely that Kyrgyzstan's plans to build the hydroelectric scheme is the real reason behind Uzbekistan's refusal to resume gas deliveries,” said one local expert who asked not to be named.

Shuhrat Ghaniev, head of the Humanitarian and Legal Centre in the western city of Bukhara, insisted that access to water was key.

“The struggle to control this resource is the most important factor determining its [Uzbekistan's] relations

with upstream countries,” he said.

While Kyrgyzstan may gain from closer ties with Russia, Ghaniev argues that the reverse side of this could be a perception that the country is no longer an independent player in Central Asia. Nor, he says, should Russia be seen as a wholly benign partner.

“In their relations with one another, it’s very important for countries in this region to define what their priorities are on their own,” he said, adding that this was even more crucial in the Ferghana Valley, a region where Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have shared borders.

Pointing to the Russian annexation of Crimea this March, Ghaniev said the Central Asian states must sort out their relationships “without intrusive mediation from Putin, given how dangerous Russia can be with its unpredictable expansionism within the former Soviet Union”.

Ghaniev’s concerns are shared by some political analysts in Kyrgyzstan like Shairbek Juraev, who sees the delegation of gas talks to Gazprom as short-sighted.

“I don’t think Russia can play a big role in solving this problem,” he said.

As the gas dispute drags on, it is having a direct impact in southern Kyrgyzstan, a volatile region which was the scene of mass ethnic violence in June 2010.

Failure to deliver could cost the Kyrgyz government dear, reducing its control in a part of the country where its grip has not always been firm.

Ernist Nurmatov, a journalist based in the southern “capital” Osh, says that people are coping at the moment but the mood could change when the summer heat fades.

He explained that even when gas supplies were uninterrupted, people tend to rely on electricity for both heating and cooking. “But if everyone uses electricity for heating this winter, I don’t know what will happen in Osh,” he added.

Nurmatov said the fuel issue had been taken up by the opposition.

“Some 60 or 70 per cent of the population in the Osh and Jalalabad regions feel resentful that no one cares about them, and this feeling is currently growing stronger,” he said.

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