

## **Tajik-Uzbek Relations at Low Ebb**

**Author:** [Humairo Bakhtiyor](#)

As Uzbek leader calls for respect and mutual understanding, many Tajiks believe it is time he showed some.

Uzbek president Islam Karimov's recent appeal for peace, understanding and cooperation in Central Asia met with a cautious welcome and some bemusement in neighbouring Tajikistan.

Karimov made the call at a government meeting in Tashkent on January 18.

Relations between Uzbekistan and smaller Tajikistan have been troubled since they gained independence in 1991.

Most recently, the Uzbeks have been at odds with Tajikistan over its plans to complete the Roghun hydroelectric project, a giant, half-finished scheme that would solve its chronic electricity shortages at a stroke.

Alarmed at the prospect of losing control of how water flows down the Amu Darya river to irrigate its fields, Uzbekistan got the World Bank to carry out a study of the dam's implications, and the project is on hold while this process is completed.

Tajiks believe Tashkent uses every weapon at its disposal to give them and their leaders a hard time over Roghun. At the end of December, for example, Tajik energy officials said Uzbekistan had cut off natural gas supplies, and it went on to ban trucks from transporting compressed gas to the energy-poor country.

The dispute plays out at grassroots level, too. People trying to earn a living by trading across the border say Uzbek officials have blocked them from doing so, out of what they believe is sheer vindictiveness.

In Dushanbe, officials are keeping a brave face on things.

"There are difficulties, mainly in the areas of water and energy," Tajik foreign minister Hamrakhon Zarifi said. "Tajikistan is trying to use every available opportunity to make the relationship better."

Some experts in Tajikistan are proposing a broader framework for dialogue with Uzbekistan that would bring in academics and religious clerics as well as government officials.

Suhrob Sharipov, a member of the Tajik parliament, is unconvinced. He sees it as unfair that it is always Tajikistan that has to take the first step toward defusing any dispute with its neighbour, and says it is high time Tashkent reciprocated.

"I don't think Dushanbe can go much further than this. Making further concessions would go against the country's sovereignty and interests," he said. "We have exhausted all the channels for improving economic, social and cultural relations."

Political analyst Qosimibek Muhammad believes the fundamental problem in Central Asia is that the new states that emerged from the Soviet Union Asia have yet to genuinely accept their neighbours as independent equals.

Uzbekistan, centrally located and with the biggest population of the five states, has always had ambitions to be the number one regional power, and all governments in the region are susceptible to external influences, he argues.

"Each of these countries has tried to attract the favour of international players in order to bolster its own influence," Muhammad said. "But the result is that they become more vulnerable."

Foreign minister Zarifi argues that political difficulties cannot affect the traditionally close ties between Uzbeks and Tajiks.

"If the political institutions haven't been entirely effective, that doesn't signify that relations between the two peoples have got any worse," he said.

**Humairo Bakhtiyor is an IWPR-trained reporter in Tajikistan.**

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