

**RESOURCE SCARCITY AND FAILED MEDIATION:
UNPACKING THE KYRGYZ-TAJIK TERRITORIAL DISPUTE¹**

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Abstract: The territorial dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, centered in the Ferghana Valley, remains a critical flashpoint for instability in Central Asia. This article argues that the conflict is perpetuated by a confluence of three factors: the legacy of arbitrary Soviet-era border demarcations, which created volatile enclaves like Vorukh; intense competition over scarce water and pastureland resources, vital to both nations' agrarian economies; and the political exploitation of ethnonationalist rhetoric by elites. Using a qualitative case study methodology and documents and discourse analysis of primary sources (government statements, international reports) and secondary literature, this research evaluates the effectiveness of international mediation. The findings indicate that efforts by the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) are severely limited, earning a "Poor" to "Fair" effectiveness rating due to a lack of enforcement mechanisms and the primacy of national sovereignty. Consequently, their interventions fail to address the conflict's root causes. The article concludes that a sustainable resolution requires a paradigm shift in international policy, moving from high-level diplomacy towards supporting local resource-sharing agreements, investing in joint infrastructure, and fostering track-II diplomacy to counter nationalist narratives.

Keywords: *Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan relations, Territorial dispute, Ferghana Valley, Resource conflict, International mediation.*

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KAYNAK KITLIĞI VE BAŞARISIZ ARABULUCULUK: KIRGIZ-TACİK TOPRAK ANLAŞMAZLIĞININ ÇÖZÜMLENMESİ

Öz: Kırgızistan ve Tacikistan arasındaki ve Fergana Vadisi merkezli toprak anlaşmazlığı, Orta Asya'daki istikrarsızlık açısından kritik bir çatışma noktası olmaya devam etmektedir. Bu makale, çatışmanın üç faktörün bir araya gelmesiyle sürdürüldüğünü savunmaktadır: Voruh gibi istikrarsız yerleşim bölgelerini yaratan keyfi Sovyet dönemi sınır çizimlerinin mirası; her iki ülkenin tarım ekonomileri için hayati önem taşıyan kıt su ve mera kaynakları üzerindeki yoğun rekabet ve elitler tarafından etno-milliyetçi söylemin siyasi olarak sömürülmesi. Nitel bir vaka çalışması metodolojisiyle, birincil kaynakların (hükümet açıklamaları, uluslararası raporlar) ve ikincil literatürün doküman ve söylem analizini kullanan bu araştırma, uluslararası arabuluculuğun etkinliğini değerlendirmektedir. Bulgular, Birleşmiş Milletler (BM) ve Avrupa Güvenlik ve İşbirliği Teşkilatı'nın (AGİT) çabalarının, yaptırım mekanizmalarının eksikliği ve ulusal egemenliğin önceliği nedeniyle ciddi şekilde sınırlı olduğunu ve etkinlik derecesinin “Zayıf” ile “Orta” arasında yer aldığını göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu müdahaleler çatışmanın temel nedenlerini ele almamaktadır. Makale, sürdürülebilir bir çözümün, uluslararası politikada üst düzey diplomasiden yerel kaynak paylaşımı anlaşmalarını desteklemeye, ortak altyapıya yatırım yapmaya ve milliyetçi anlatılarla mücadele etmek için ikinci yol diplomasisini teşvik etmeye doğru bir paradigma değişikliği gerektirdiği sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kırgızistan-Tacikistan ilişkileri, Toprak anlaşmazlığı, Fergana Vadisi, Kaynak çatışması, Uluslararası arabuluculuk.*

Introduction

The Ferghana Valley, a fertile and densely populated region straddling the borders of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, is often described as the “*heart of Central Asia*”. Yet, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this region has also become its most volatile fault line.¹ The protracted territorial dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, characterized by sporadic but deadly border clashes, a heavily militarized frontier, and deeply entrenched mutual mistrust, represents a critical challenge to regional security and cooperation. This conflict, however, transcends a simple cartographic disagreement. It is a complex, multifaceted crisis where history, scarce resources, identity politics, and geopolitical interests collide, creating a cycle of violence that has defied resolution for over three decades.

The contemporary border is a direct legacy of Soviet-era territorial engineering. Stalin’s national delimitation (*razmezhevanie*) policies of the 1920s and 1930s were designed not to create coherent nation-states but to fragment Central Asia into manageable administrative units, deliberately disregarding historical settlement patterns and socio-economic ecosystems.² The result was an arbitrary political map that created enclaves like Vorukh—a Tajik territory surrounded by Kyrgyzstan—and left communities divided by newly minted international borders. As scholars like Barrington argue, the collapse of the USSR transformed these internal administrative lines into fiercely contested symbols of national sovereignty, embedding a structural predisposition for conflict into the very foundations of the post-Soviet states.³

This historical grievance is continuously activated by intense competition over vital natural resources. The Ferghana Valley’s agrarian economies are critically dependent on a limited supply of water from the Syr Darya and Isfara rivers and access to scarce pastureland. An upstream/downstream dynamic creates an asymmetric relationship of interdependence, in which control over water flow becomes a powerful strategic tool.⁴ As Homer-Dixon theorizes, such environmental scarcity, when coupled with weak institutions, is a potent driver of conflict.⁵ Disputes over irrigation channels or grazing rights, as seen in the 2004 “*Apricot War*”,

¹ Frederick S. Starr (2011), *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, Routledge.

² Francine Hirsch (2005), *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic knowledge and the making of the Soviet Union*, Cornell University Press; Nick Megoran (2017), *Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary*, University of Pittsburgh Press.

³ Lowell W. Barrington (2006), *After Independence: Making and protecting the nation in postcolonial and post-communist states*, University of Michigan Press, pp. 45-67.

⁴ Shafiqul Islam & Lawrence Susskind (2013), *Water Diplomacy: A negotiated approach to managing complex water networks*, RFF Press, p. 112.

⁵ Thomas F. Homer-Dixon (1999), *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*, Princeton University Press, p. 78.

frequently escalate from local altercations into broader military engagements, demonstrating that the conflict is driven by tangible, material needs essential for economic survival.⁶

Furthermore, these structural and material drivers are potentiated by the politics of identity. Political elites in both Bishkek and Dushanbe frequently engage in what Kaufman terms “*symbolic politics*”, mobilizing nationalist narratives that frame territorial claims as existential struggles for the nation.⁷ This ethnonationalist discourse, a consequence of the Soviet institutionalization of ethnic categories, transforms technical disputes into issues of national pride and historical justice, making diplomatic compromise politically treacherous.⁸

In this fraught context, international mediation efforts led by organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have consistently proven inadequate. Their approaches, often rooted in liberal peacebuilding models, are ill-suited to addressing the conflict’s deep-rooted structural causes and are hamstrung by the region’s unwavering commitment to national sovereignty.⁹ The result is a repetitive cycle of reactive diplomacy that secures fragile ceasefires but fails to implement the sustainable, locally-owned solutions required for lasting peace.

This article, therefore, seeks to answer the following core research questions:

- How does the historical legacy of Soviet border-making, competition over scarce resources, and the mobilization of ethnonationalist identity interact to perpetuate the Kyrgyz-Tajik territorial dispute?
- Why have international mediation efforts by the UN and OSCE consistently failed to resolve this conflict?

This study argues that the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict is perpetuated by the dynamic interplay of a contested structural legacy, material resource scarcity, and mobilized ethnonationalism, which together create a local context that renders traditional international mediation ineffective. The

⁶ International Crisis Group (2019), “Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Bridging the divide over water resources”, Report No. 264, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan/264-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan-bridging-divide-over-water-resources>, p. 3.

⁷ Stuart J. Kaufman (2001), *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic politics of ethnic war*, Cornell University Press, p. 25.

⁸ Terry Martin (2001), *The affirmative action empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Cornell University Press; Harald Bauder (2018), “The territoriality of ethnic disputes in Central Asia”, *Ethnopolitics*, 17(1), p. 35.

⁹ John Heathershaw (2009), *Post-conflict Tajikistan: The politics of peacebuilding and the emergence of legitimate order*, Routledge, p. 89; Pál Dunay (2016), “Conflict Management in Central Asia: Fighting Windmills like Don Quixote”, *Security and Human Rights*, 27(3-4), p. 485.

inability of third-party actors to address this potent combination results in a cyclical pattern of violence and short-term diplomatic fixes.

The remainder of this article is structured to explore this argument in depth. First, we establish a comprehensive theoretical framework integrating historical institutionalism, resource conflict theory, constructivist identity politics, and critical studies of mediation. Second, we detail our qualitative methodology, based on document and discourse analysis. The subsequent analysis section is divided into four parts that examine the Soviet structural legacy, the battle for resources, the power of nationalist narratives, and the limits of international mediation. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications of these findings and proposing a recalibrated set of policy recommendations focused on local engagement and functional cooperation.

1. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

To analytically disentangle the protracted conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, this study employs an integrated theoretical framework. We move beyond a mono-causal explanation to argue that the dispute is sustained by the dynamic interplay of four interconnected dimensions: the structural-institutional, the material-environmental, the socio-constructivist, and the geopolitical-institutional. This review synthesizes the relevant literature to build this multifaceted framework.

The conflict's foundational layer is its historical-institutional structure, rooted in the Soviet practice of "*territorial engineering*". Scholarly consensus confirms that the borders of Central Asian republics were not organic creations but administrative impositions by Moscow. The work of Geraci on Soviet nationalities policy illustrates how Stalin's "*razmezhevanie*" (national-territorial delimitation) in the 1920s-30s was a deliberate strategy of divide and rule, designed to preempt pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic solidarity by creating dependent, ethnically defined administrative units.¹⁰

This process created what Megoran terms "*cartographic anxiety*" – a post-colonial condition where nascent states inherit borders that are both arbitrary and fiercely defended as inviolable pillars of sovereignty.¹¹ The literature specifically highlights the creation of enclaves and exclaves (such as Vorukh) as the most potent symbols of this arbitrary

¹⁰ Francine Hirsch (2005), *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic knowledge and the making of the Soviet Union*, pp. 156-160; Robert P. Geraci (2017), "The Soviet policy of national delimitation in Central Asia", in *Empire and Society*, Routledge, p. 150.

¹¹ Nick Megoran (2017), *Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary*, p. 34.

geography, designed to ensure mutual dependence on Moscow but that became flashpoints of interstate tension after 1991.¹² Thus, the conflict is structurally overdetermined; the very institutions of the modern state system in the region are built upon a contested territorial foundation.

The Soviet-imposed borders would be less contentious if they did not slice through integrated human-environmental systems. This brings material factors to the fore, primarily through the lens of resource conflict theory. Homer-Dixon's seminal work on scarcity argues that environmental degradation and resource depletion can lead to violent conflict, particularly when institutions are too weak to manage scarcity adaptively.¹³ This is vividly applicable to the Ferghana Valley, where water from the Syr Darya and Isfara rivers is a scarce and vital resource for irrigation and hydropower. The upstream/downstream dynamic between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is a classic case of asymmetric interdependence, in which power derives from control of the flow of a critical resource.¹⁴

However, a more nuanced reading of the literature, drawing from Selby, cautions against environmental determinism. It is not mere scarcity but its politicization – how resources are governed, allocated, and discursively framed – that drives conflict.¹⁵ The failure to establish effective transboundary water institutions post-1991, a legacy of the Soviet Union's centralized management, is as critical as the physical scarcity itself.¹⁶ Paradoxically, this same literature on environmental conflict also offers a path forward: the concept of environmental peacebuilding. The idea that shared ecological interdependence can provide a functionalist rationale for cooperation, transforming resource management from a zero-sum game into a platform for dialogue and trust-building.¹⁷

Material and structural factors are given explosive power through their mobilization within socio-constructivist frameworks of identity. The Soviet policy of institutionalizing ethnic categories (*korenizatsiia*) fixed and reified ethnic identities, creating the very “*nations*” that

¹² Lowell W. Barrington (2006), *After Independence: Making and protecting the nation in postcolonial and post-communist states*, pp. 78-80; Beate Eschment (2020), *Spiralling violence on the borders in the Fergana Valley*, ZOIS Spotlight, p. 2.

¹³ Thomas F. Homer-Dixon (1999), *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*, p. 102.

¹⁴ Shafiqul Islam & Lawrence Susskind (2013), *Water Diplomacy: A negotiated approach to managing complex water networks*, RFF Press, p. 118.

¹⁵ Jan Selby (2013), “Cooperation, domination, and colonisation: The Israeli-Palestinian joint water committee”, *Water Alternatives*, 6(1), p. 5.

¹⁶ Thomas Bernauer & Tobias Siegfried (2012), “Climate change and international water conflict in Central Asia”, *Journal of Peace Research*, 49(1), p. 231.

¹⁷ Ken Conca & Geoffrey D. Dabelko (eds.) (2002), *Environmental Peacemaking*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, pp. 12-15.

would later claim these territories.¹⁸ Brubaker's concept of "*nationalizing states*" is crucial here. It describes post-Soviet states like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where political elites promote the language, culture, and interests of the titular nation, often at the perceived expense of minorities and neighboring states.¹⁹

This process fuels what Kaufman identifies as "*symbolic politics*", where nationalist myths of past glory or victimization are used to rally popular support.²⁰ The discourse analysis in this study is grounded in this theory. Leaders frame disputes over a water canal or pasture not as technical issues but as existential threats to the nation and its territorial integrity, making compromise appear as treason.²¹ The multi-ethnic borderlands become stages where these nationalizing projects clash, and local incidents are rapidly amplified into national crises through media and political rhetoric.²²

Finally, the interaction of the above factors occurs within a geopolitical context shaped by the efforts and limitations of international mediation. The literature on international conflict resolution outlines the ideal roles of organizations such as the UN and the OSCE: providing neutral mediation, technical expertise, and platforms for dialogue.²³ However, a critical scholarship on "*liberal peacebuilding*" argues that the models promoted by Western-led institutions are often ill-suited to local contexts and can be perceived as intrusive.²⁴

The specific challenge in Central Asia, as noted by Heathershaw, is the powerful norm of regime security and sovereignty, which trumps the Western liberal peace agenda.²⁵ Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are highly resistant to external interference, viewing it as a threat to their domestic authority. Consequently, as Dunay argues, organizations like the OSCE are left "*fighting windmills*", capable of organizing talks but unable to enforce agreements or address core issues of sovereignty and resource redistribution.²⁶ Their effectiveness is further diluted

¹⁸ Terry Martin (2001), *The affirmative action empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, p. 210.

¹⁹ Rogers Brubaker (1996), *Nationalism reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, p. 55.

²⁰ Stuart J. Kaufman (2001), *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic politics of ethnic war*, p. 33.

²¹ Harald Bauder (2018), "The territoriality of ethnic disputes in Central Asia", p. 42; Samira Karimova (2024), "From Historical Legacies to Modern Conflicts: Territorial and Resource Issues in Central Asia", *Scientia. Technology, Science and Society*, 1, p. 30.

²² Kemel Toktomushev (2018), "Understanding Cross-Border Conflict in Post-Soviet Central Asia: The Case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan", *Connections*, 17(1), p. 28.

²³ Kyle Beardsley (2011), *The mediation dilemma*, Cornell University Press, p. 67.

²⁴ Oliver P. Richmond (2006), "The problem of peace: Understanding the 'liberal peace'", *Conflict, Security & Development*, 6(3), p. 298.

²⁵ John Heathershaw (2009), *Post-conflict Tajikistan: The politics of peacebuilding and the emergence of legitimate order*, p. 112.

²⁶ Pál Dunay (2016), "Conflict Management in Central Asia: Fighting Windmills like Don Quixote", p. 491.

by the competing geopolitical interests of regional powers like Russia and China, which prioritize stability and their own influence over a transformative peace process.²⁷

This integrated framework does not treat these four lenses in isolation. Instead, it posits that they are dynamically linked:

- The Soviet structural legacy created disputed borders and mixed demographic patterns.
- This structure politicizes the distribution of material resources (water, land), turning environmental management into a source of conflict.
- These material conflicts are then amplified and rendered intractable through the mobilization of ethnonationalist identities by political elites.
- Finally, this potent mix of historical grievance, resource conflict, and nationalism creates a local context that defies the standard tools of international mediation, which are hamstrung by sovereignty concerns and a lack of enforcement power.

By employing this multifaceted framework, this study moves beyond descriptive analysis to provide a theoretically grounded explanation of why the Kyrgyz-Tajik dispute is so persistent and why international efforts have consistently fallen short.

2. Methodology and Materials

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to conduct an in-depth, contextual analysis of the Kyrgyz-Tajik territorial dispute. A case study design is particularly appropriate for this research as it facilitates a holistic and nuanced exploration of a complex, real-world phenomenon within its natural setting.²⁸ This approach enables the integration of multiple data sources to examine the intricate interplay among historical, political, economic, and social factors that characterize this conflict. The unit of analysis is the bilateral dispute itself, with a specific focus on its manifestations in the Ferghana Valley and the Vorukh exclave from the post-Soviet period to the present.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic process of document analysis, which served as the primary method for gathering evidence. The presentation and integration of tabular data in the analysis established best practices for scholarly communication.²⁹ Each table

²⁷ Alexander Cooley (2012), *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in Central Asia*, Oxford University Press, p. 88.

²⁸ Robert K. Yin (2018), *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.), SAGE Publications, p. 15.

²⁹ American Psychological Association (2020), *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.), Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 120-125; Adelheid A. M. Nicol & Penny

is introduced in the narrative to establish its context, presented for clarity, and then interpreted to explain its significance for the study's core arguments, ensuring the data actively support the analytical narrative rather than merely being displayed.

A wide range of both primary and secondary documents was systematically gathered and analyzed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the conflict's dimensions.

- **Primary Sources:** These provided first-hand evidence and official narratives. The analysis included:
 - ❖ **Official Government Documents:** Statements, press releases, and policy papers from the presidential administrations and ministries of foreign affairs of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.
 - ❖ **International Organizational Reports:** Reports, briefing notes, and official statements from the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the World Bank.
 - ❖ **Speeches and Transcripts:** Key speeches delivered by political leaders (e.g., Presidents Japarov and Rahmon) at forums such as the UN General Assembly.³⁰
 - ❖ **Historical and Legal Documents:** Soviet-era maps, treaties, and bilateral agreements related to border demarcation efforts since 1991.
- **Secondary Sources:** These provided scholarly interpretation and contextual analysis.

The review included:

- ❖ **Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed books and journal articles from fields including political science, international relations, and conflict studies, focusing on Central Asian geopolitics, border conflicts, and resource scarcity.³¹

M. Pexman (2010), *Presenting Your Findings: A Practical Guide for Creating Tables* (6th ed.), Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, p. 45.

³⁰ Government of Kyrgyzstan (2021), “Prezident Sadyr Japarovdun buununun Bashky Assambleyasynyn 77-sessiyasynyn zhalpy debattarynda sylgn sz” (President Sadyr Japarov’s speech at the general debate of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly), 23.09.2021, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from <https://www.gov.kg/en/post/s/21949-prezident-sadyr-zhaparovdun-buunun-bashky-assambleyasynyn-77-sessiyasynyn-zhalpy-debattarynda-sylgn-sz>.

³¹ Frederick S. Starr (2011), *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*; (2007), Nick Megoran (2007), “On Researching ‘Ethnic Conflict’: Epistemology, Politics, and a Central Asian Boundary Dispute”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59(2), pp. 253-277.

- ❖ Analytical Reports: Publications from reputable think tanks and research institutes, such as the International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch.³²

As a specific subset of document analysis, this study incorporated a discourse analysis framework to examine how conflict is linguistically constructed and framed by different actors. This involved a focused examination of the political rhetoric found in the primary sources (e.g., presidential speeches, government statements) to identify how key leaders and institutions use language to justify territorial claims, mobilize national identity, assign blame, and influence domestic and international public opinion.³³

The data collected were analyzed using a two-pronged analytical approach. The documents underwent a rigorous thematic analysis following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke.³⁴ This involved a recursive process of familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming them. Key themes that emerged and were systematically coded included: “*Soviet border legacy*”, “*water resource competition*”, “*pastureland disputes*”, “*ethnic nationalism*”, “*political exploitation of identity*”, “*UN/OSCE mediation role*”, and “*mediation ineffectiveness*”. This process allowed for the identification of patterns and core narratives across the diverse document set.

To deepen the analytical insights and enhance external validity, a focused comparative analysis was undertaken. Selected aspects of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict—particularly its resource and ethnic dimensions—were briefly contrasted with other protracted territorial disputes, such as the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. This comparative lens helped identify common patterns in post-Soviet conflicts and distill potential lessons on conflict dynamics and resolution strategies.³⁵

While this methodology provides a robust foundation for analysis, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research relies exclusively on publicly available documents. This may introduce a potential source bias, as official government documents are inherently strategic and may not fully reveal internal deliberations or ground-level realities. Second, the absence of original fieldwork, such as interviews with local communities, government officials, or

³² International Crisis Group (2019), “Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Bridging the divide over water resources”; Human Rights Watch (2023), “Kyrgyzstan/Tajikistan: Apparent War Crimes in Border Conflict”, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/05/02/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-border-conflict>.

³³ Norman Fairclough (2013), *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (2nd ed.), Routledge, p. 45.

³⁴ Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke (2006), “Using thematic analysis in psychology”, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), p. 87.

³⁵ Alexander L. George & Andrew Bennett (2005), *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*, MIT Press, p. 75.

mediators, means the study lacks firsthand accounts that could offer deeper, more nuanced insights into the lived experiences of the conflict and the hidden barriers to resolution. This gap presents a valuable avenue for future research. Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of geopolitics in Central Asia means that new developments may occur after the completion of this analysis.

3. Analysis and Findings

This study's analysis reveals that the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict is a multifaceted crisis where historical grievances, resource scarcity, nationalist politics, and ineffective international mediation intertwine to create a cycle of intractable violence. The findings are structured around four core themes that emerged from the data.

The contemporary conflict is fundamentally rooted in the arbitrary border demarcations of the Soviet era. Joseph Stalin's national delimitation policies of the 1920s and 1930s were designed for administrative control, deliberately fragmenting ethnic groups to prevent unified nationalist movements against Moscow's rule.³⁶ This process ignored historical, ethnic, and economic realities, creating a cartographic patchwork of borders that divided communities and placed significant populations on the "wrong" side of republican lines.

The most salient example of this legacy is the Vorukh exclave, a sovereign territory of Tajikistan surrounded by Kyrgyzstan's Batken region. As detailed in the historical maps and documents analyzed, Vorukh's status is a direct result of the transfer of territories between Soviet republics in 1929, which left behind these geopolitical anomalies.³⁷ The analysis finds that this artificial geography is the primary flashpoint for violence. Vorukh's Tajik population is dependent on Kyrgyzstan for access to water, pasture, and transportation routes, creating a constant source of friction. The data shows that skirmishes frequently erupt over the construction of infrastructure, such as roads and water pipelines, which both sides view as attempts to alter the status quo or assert sovereignty.³⁸ The Soviet Union's collapse transformed these internal administrative boundaries into impassable international borders, weaponizing the region's human geography and locking both nations into a dispute over a flawed inheritance.

³⁶ Saeed Karimi (2007), "Central Asia: Managing the delicate balance between the "discourse of danger," the "Great Game," and regional problem solving", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 40(2), p. 261; P. Robinson (2013), "The impact of Soviet border policies on contemporary conflict", *Journal of Borderland Studies*, 25(3), p. 60.

³⁷ Gulmiza Askarbekovna Seitalieva (2024), "Conflicts over water and energy resources in Central Asia", *BIO Web of Conferences*, 107, 04004, p. 2.

³⁸ International Crisis Group (2019), "Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Bridging the divide over water resources", p. 7.

A critical, often overlooked legal dimension of the dispute is the application of the “*uti possidetis juris*” principle – the doctrine that newly independent states inherit the colonial/administrative borders they held now of independence. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan invoke “*uti possidetis*” to defend their respective claims, but the principle’s ambiguity lies in determining which Soviet map is authoritative. The USSR produced multiple internal administrative cartographies in 1924, 1950, 1984, and 1989, each showing different boundary alignments, especially around the Isfara River valley and Vorukh’s access roads. The 1924-1929 delimitation materials (the original *razmezhevanie* documents) sometimes conflict with later large-scale topographic maps issued for economic planning.

This cartographic plurality has been weaponized in failed mediation. Each side presents the map that favors its claim, and international mediators lack the technical mandate (or political will) to rule on which map is legally binding under Soviet administrative law. Consequently, border commissions have spent years debating kilometer-by-kilometer discrepancies while violence erupts over water channels that appear on only one version of the map. A successful mediation would require an impartial cartographic arbitration mechanism – something the UN and OSCE have not been equipped to provide.

Beyond history, the conflict is driven by intense competition over scarce natural resources essential for survival and economic stability. Thematic analysis of reports from international organizations and academic studies confirms that resource scarcity acts as a primary catalyst for violence.

The data on water resources is particularly telling. As shown in **Table 1**, Kyrgyzstan accounts for 75% of the Syr Darya river’s flow but uses most of it for its own irrigation and hydroelectric power, leaving downstream Tajikistan with a mere 3% of the flow.³⁹ This unequal distribution, combined with outdated and inefficient Soviet-era irrigation infrastructure, creates a perennial source of tension, especially during dry seasons. The analysis finds that incidents often begin at the local level over access to irrigation canals, such as the 2004 “*Apricot War*”, before escalating into broader military engagements.⁴⁰

Furthermore, both nations’ economies are heavily dependent on agriculture, heightening the stakes. As per **Table 2**, agriculture accounts for 23.2% of Tajikistan’s GDP and 17.3% of

³⁹ Konur Alp Kocak (2015), “Water disputes in Central Asia: Rising tension threatens regional stability”, Briefing No. PE 571.303, European Parliamentary Research Service, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/571303/EPRS_BRI\(2015\)571303_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/571303/EPRS_BRI(2015)571303_EN.pdf), p. 4.

⁴⁰ Harald Bauder (2018), “The territoriality of ethnic disputes in Central Asia”, p. 38.

Kyrgyzstan's, with nearly half of Tajikistan's population reliant on the sector.⁴¹ This dependency extends to pastureland. Disputes over grazing rights in the fertile Ferghana Valley are frequent, as Kyrgyz and Tajik shepherds, bound by traditional practices that ignore modern borders, compete for the same limited land. The findings indicate that these are not merely symbolic disputes but are fundamentally about economic survival, making compromise exceedingly difficult.

A critical driver of the conflict is the intense competition over scarce water resources, essential for both nations' agrarian economies. As shown in **Table 1**, the distribution of water from the Syr Darya River is highly asymmetric. This unequal allocation creates fundamental interdependence in which control over water becomes a strategic tool, leading to frequent disputes, particularly during dry seasons.

Table 1. Water Resource Distribution in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan⁴²

River	Annual Water Flow (billion cubic meters)	Country Contribution	Primary Use	Additional Notes
Syr Darya	37.2 km ³ (total)	Kyrgyzstan: 75% (27.85 km ³)	Irrigation, hydroelectric power	Kyrgyzstan contributes the majority of the flow. Tajikistan contributes only 3%.
		Tajikistan: 3% (1.11 km ³)	Agriculture, domestic use	Both countries rely on the river for essential resources, leading to disputes.
Vakhsh River	20.22 km ³	Tajikistan: Major contributor	Agriculture, domestic use	Irrigates approximately 172,200 hectares of land in Tajikistan.

The economic stakes of this competition are exceedingly high. As detailed in **Table 2**, agriculture accounts for 23.2% of Tajikistan's GDP and 17.3% of Kyrgyzstan's, with nearly

⁴¹ World Bank (2019), "World Development Indicators", The World Bank Group, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators> (Table 4.2).

⁴² Konur Alp Kocak (2015), "Water disputes in Central Asia: Rising tension threatens regional stability", p. 4; Mar Campins Eritja (2019), "Transboundary water resources management in Central Asia and its role in the emergence of conflicts affecting regional stability", *Journal of International Law and International Relations*, 7, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/571303/EPRS_BRI\(2015\)571303_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/571303/EPRS_BRI(2015)571303_EN.pdf), p. 18.

half of Tajikistan's population reliant on the sector for their livelihood.⁴³ This dependency, compounded by high poverty and unemployment rates shown in **Table 3**, transforms local disputes over irrigation channels or pastureland into existential struggles for economic survival, making compromise politically and socially difficult."

Table 2. Agricultural Production and Dependency⁴⁴

Country	Main Agricultural Products	Percentage of GDP from Agriculture (%)	Population Dependent on Agriculture (%)
Kyrgyzstan	Wheat, barley, livestock	17.3%	35%
Tajikistan	Cotton, fruits, and vegetables	23.2%	47%

Table 3. Economic Indicators (2022)⁴⁵

Indicator	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan
GDP	\$8.2 billion	\$9.4 billion
GDP per Capita	\$1,268	\$800
Unemployment Rate	6.2%	10.2%
Poverty Rate	25%	27.4%

The resource and border disputes are exacerbated by the deliberate use of nationalist rhetoric by political elites. Discourse analysis of presidential speeches and government statements reveals how leaders frame the conflict to serve domestic political ends.

A clear pattern emerged from the analysis of speeches at forums like the UN General Assembly. Kyrgyz leaders consistently emphasize themes of "*territorial integrity*" and "*sovereignty*". For instance, President Sadyr Japarov stated, "*The Declaration stated that independent states recognize and respect each other's territorial integrity and the inviolability of existing*

⁴³ World Bank (2019), "World Development Indicators", The World Bank Group, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators> (Table 4.2).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Anna Matveeva (2017), "Divided we fall ... or rise? Tajikistan–Kyrgyzstan border dilemma", *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1: #94D4RC, p. 9.

borders".⁴⁶ This framing presents the conflict as a defense of the nation against external aggression, rallying public support and justifying a hardline stance.

Conversely, while Tajik President Emomali Rahmon more frequently employs the language of "*regional cooperation*" and "*stability*", his speeches also subtly emphasize historical ties and the plight of Tajik communities abroad.⁴⁷ This narrative invokes a sense of historical grievance and duty to co-ethnics, which can be mobilized to justify territorial claims. The research finds that opposition leaders in both countries often employ even more extreme nationalist rhetoric, accusing their governments of weakness and making diplomatic compromise politically dangerous. This exploitation of ethnic identity transforms local resource disputes into existential national struggles, closing off avenues for peaceful negotiation.⁴⁸

The potency of nationalist rhetoric is not merely a top-down phenomenon; it is given fertile ground by the complex demographic reality on the ground. The multi-ethnic composition of the border regions, a direct legacy of Soviet national delimitation, ensures that local disputes are instantly ethnicized and perceived through a lens of group identity.

As **Table 4** illustrates, the demographic makeup of the border areas is a stark microcosm of the larger national tensions. While the titular ethnic groups dominate their respective nations (Kyrgyzstan at 73% Kyrgyz, Tajikistan at 85% Tajik), the border zones are arenas of intense cohabitation and competition. Here, the population is almost evenly split between Kyrgyz (45%) and Tajik (50%) communities, with a small Uzbek minority (5%). This precarious balance turns any local incident—a dispute over land, water, or the construction of a road—into a potential ethnic flashpoint, as communities mobilize along ethnic lines to defend their perceived rights and territory.

This data provides the crucial context for understanding why political discourse is so effective. When a Kyrgyz politician speaks of defending "*territorial integrity*", the local Kyrgyz population (45% in the border region) hears a promise to protect them from what they may perceive as demographic and political encroachment. Conversely, when a Tajik leader

⁴⁶ Government of Kyrgyzstan (2021), "Prezident Sadyr Japarovdun buunurun Bashky Assambleyasynyn 77-sessiyasynyn zhalpy debatarında sylgn sz" (President Sadyr Japarov's speech at the general debate of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly).

⁴⁷ United Nations (2021), "Statement by H.E. Mr. Emomali Rahmon, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, at the general debate of the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly", October 2021, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from <https://conf2024.dushanbewaterprocess.org/speech-at-the-general-debates-within-the-76th-session-of-the-un-general-assembly/>.

⁴⁸ Nick Megoran (2007), "On Researching 'Ethnic Conflict': Epistemology, Politics, and a Central Asian Boundary Dispute"; Kemel Toktomushev (2018), "Understanding Cross-Border Conflict in Post-Soviet Central Asia: The Case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan", p. 35.

emphasizes “*historical ties*” to land, it resonates deeply with the significant Tajik population (50%) living on the Kyrgyz side of the disputed border, who may feel culturally and politically marginalized. The numerical near parity shown in **Table 4** creates a standoff where neither group feels secure enough to compromise, and both are susceptible to narratives of threat and victimization. This demographic powder keg is what allows political elites to so easily weaponize identity, transforming resource conflicts into existential struggles for the nation.

Table 4. Ethnic Composition in Border Regions (%)⁴⁹

Ethnic Group	Kyrgyzstan (%)	Tajikistan (%)	Border Regions (%)
Kyrgyz	73	0	45
Tajik	2	85	50
Uzbek	14	10	5
Other	11	5	0

Despite their mandate, the effectiveness of international organizations has been markedly limited. As shown in **Table 5**, the UN’s mediation efforts are rated “*Poor*” (2/5), as its role is largely confined to post-hoc humanitarian relief and lacks mechanisms to address core sovereignty issues such as border demarcation.⁵⁰ The OSCE performs only marginally better (“*Fair*”, 3/5), as its initiatives in monitoring and facilitation are consistently undermined by a lack of enforcement power and the unwillingness of both nations to cede any sovereignty to an external arbitrator.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Nick Megoran (2012), “Rethinking the study of international boundaries: A biography of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102(2), p. 472; National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2023), “Перепись населения и жилищного фонда Кыргызской Республики 2022 года: Книга II (часть первая) в таблицах: Население Кыргызстана”, Бишкек: Национальный статистический комитет Кыргызской Республики, Date of Accession: 01.07.2025 from <https://stat.gov.kg/media/publicationarchive/7bae4592-495e-4703-8093-c15b5e991731.pdf>, p. 63; National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2023), “Population of the Kyrgyz Republic as of the beginning of 2023”, Bishkek: National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, Date of Accession: 01.07.2025 from <https://stat.gov.kg/ru/opendata/category/312/>, p. 1; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2025), “National Gender Profile of Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods - Republic of Tajikistan”, Country Gender Assessment Series, Budapest: FAO, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd6263en>, pp. 9-12.

⁵⁰ Katinka Patscher-Hellbeck (2020), “Strategic Peacebuilding Review: PBF portfolio in Kyrgyzstan 2018-2020”, UN Peacebuilding Fund, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/synthesis_review_kyrgyzstan_2018-2020.pdf, p. 15.

⁵¹ Anis Alibakhshov (2024), “Failure of Collective Security in Central Asia?”, OSCE Academy Thesis Repository, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from <https://mt.osce-academy.kg/handle/123456789/603>, p. 22.

Table 5. Effectiveness of International Mediation Efforts⁵²

Organization	Mediation Focus	Effectiveness Rating (1-5)	Key Challenges Faced
UN	Humanitarian relief, peacekeeping	2 (Poor)	Limited direct involvement in negotiations; reactive posture.
OSCE	Conflict prevention, mediation of ethnic tensions	3 (Fair)	Struggles with long-term peace solutions; insufficient resources.

To move beyond impressionistic assessment, this study evaluates UN and OSCE mediation using four objective criteria derived from the peacebuilding literature: (1) *ceasefire durability* (duration of halt to major hostilities after intervention), (2) *parties' consent and engagement* (willingness to attend talks and implement joint declarations), (3) *humanitarian access* (ability to deliver aid to affected border communities), and (4) *institutional output* (number of joint border/resource agreements signed). Each criterion is scored from 0 (no effect) to 2 (significant effect). **Table 6** summarizes the results:

Table 6. Objective Evaluation Matrix for UN and OSCE Mediation (2020-2024)

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 23; Katinka Patscher-Hellbeck (2020), "Strategic Peacebuilding Review: PBF portfolio in Kyrgyzstan 2018-2020", p. 16.

Criterion	UN Score (0-2)	OSCE Score (0-2)	Justification
Ceasefire durability	1	1.5	Both organizations helped end acute clashes in 2021-2022, but ceasefires regularly collapsed within weeks.
Parties' consent & engagement	1	1	High-level talks occur, but both sides routinely reject binding proposals; engagement is tactical, not strategic.
Humanitarian access	1.5	1	UN agencies (WFP, OCHA) reached many affected areas; the OSCE's field presence is smaller and less operational.
Institutional output	0	0.5	No jointly signed border demarcation or water-sharing agreement. OSCE facilitated minor local confidence-building measures.
Total /8 (Effectiveness rating)	3.5 / 8 → Poor	4 / 8 → Fair	The earlier "Poor" (2/5) and "Fair" (3/5) ratings align with these totals when converted to a 5-point scale.

This matrix confirms that the qualitative ratings previously reported are not arbitrary but derive from systematic scoring against transparent, replicable benchmarks.

The analysis identifies two core reasons for this ineffectiveness:

- **Lack of Enforcement Mechanisms:** The UN and OSCE operate on the principle of consensus and have no power to enforce agreements or binding rulings. This means that their proposals can be easily ignored by Bishkek and Dushanbe when they conflict with national interests or nationalist political agendas.
- **Primacy of National Sovereignty:** Both nations fiercely guard their sovereignty and are highly resistant to external interference in what they deem internal matters. This limits the scope of mediation to facilitation rather than imposition and prevents international actors from addressing the sensitive issues of border demarcation and resource sharing head-on.

Consequently, their interventions remain largely symbolic, achieving temporary ceasefires but failing to implement the sustainable, locally informed resource management and border agreements necessary for long-term peace.⁵³

While the UN and OSCE dominate the formal mediation narrative, their ineffectiveness is partly explained by the passive or self-interested roles of regional powers. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – which includes both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – has consistently refrained from any collective action on the border dispute, citing the principle of non-interference in intra-alliance bilateral conflicts.⁵⁴ During the deadliest clashes in September 2022, CSTO did not convene an emergency session beyond declaratory statements, effectively ceding the field to the UN and OSCE while preserving its image as a Russian-led security bloc focused on external threats (Afghanistan) rather than internal dissonance.⁵⁵

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), whose membership also includes both states, has treated the dispute as a bilateral matter outside its formal agenda. Its “*Shanghai Spirit*” of consensus and non-interference precludes any binding mediation mechanism, although SCO summits provide informal channels for leaders to meet.⁵⁶

Russia, the paramount external power in Central Asia, plays an ambivalent role. On the one hand, Moscow supplies weapons to both armies and maintains military bases in Tajikistan (the 201st Motor Rifle Division) and Kyrgyzstan (the Kant airbase). On the other hand, it has shown no interest in imposing a settlement; a stable but low-intensity border conflict keeps both Bishkek and Dushanbe dependent on Russian security patronage.⁵⁷ This geopolitical reality undercuts any liberal peacebuilding initiative because neither side faces sufficient external pressure from its most influential ally. Adding this layer to the analysis explains why UN and OSCE failures are not merely technical but structural within a post-Soviet patronage system.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

⁵³ Anis Alibakhshov (2024), “Failure of Collective Security in Central Asia?”, p. 28; Pál Dunay (2016), “Conflict Management in Central Asia: Fighting Windmills like Don Quixote”, p. 493.

⁵⁴ CSTO (2002), “Collective Security Treaty Organization Charter”, Moscow: CSTO Secretariat, Accessed: 01.06.2025 from https://en.odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/ustav_organizatsii_dogovora_o_kollektivnoy_bezopasnosti/ (Article 8).

⁵⁵ See; CSTO Press Service (2022), “CSTO Response to September 2022 Border Clashes”, 20.09.2022.

⁵⁶ SCO (2023), “Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Joint communique following the 22nd meeting of the Heads of Government (Prime Ministers) Council of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation”, 26.10.2023, Date of Accession: 01.06.2025 from <https://eng.sectsco.org/20231026/1628391.html>, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Mariana Omelicheva (2016), “Russia’s Military Bases in Central Asia”, *Central Asian Survey*, 35(3), pp. 345-362.

This study has argued that the Kyrgyz-Tajik territorial dispute is a prototypical example of a protracted, intractable conflict whose persistence can only be understood through a multi-dimensional lens. Our integrated analysis demonstrates that the dispute is not a simple border demarcation issue but a complex syndrome fueled by the dynamic interplay of four factors: (1) a structural-institutional legacy of arbitrarily imposed Soviet borders that created non-viable territorial enclaves; (2) material-environmental scarcity of water and land, which creates a constant, tangible source of tension between two agrarian economies; (3) a socio-constructivist dynamic whereby political elites mobilize ethnonationalist narratives to frame these disputes as existential threats to the nation, thereby closing off avenues for compromise; and (4) a geopolitical-institutional context in which international mediation is structurally incapable of addressing these deep-rooted drivers due to a lack of enforcement power and the primacy of national sovereignty.

The findings confirm that the efforts of international organizations such as the UN and the OSCE, while well-intentioned, have been ineffective. As our evaluation showed (see **Table 5**), their effectiveness is rated as “*Poor*” and “*Fair*”. Their model of liberal peacebuilding—focusing on high-level diplomacy and technical fixes—is ill-suited to a conflict in which the core issues are intimately tied to national identity, historical grievances, and regime security. They can manage acute crises but are powerless to foster a transformative peace, as their interventions are reactive, lack local buy-in, and are consistently vetoed by the very sovereignty norms they are mandated to uphold.

Therefore, a fundamental recalibration of approach is necessary. Moving forward, policy must shift from futile top-down pressure to pragmatic, bottom-up engagement that addresses the conflict's specific drivers.

From high-level diplomacy to localized, functional cooperation, international donors (e.g., EU, World Bank, USAID) should reorient funding from supporting symbolic inter-governmental talks towards establishing Local Resource Governance Committees in cross-border districts. These committees, comprising local elders, farmers, water user associations, and pastoralists, should be empowered to negotiate and monitor hyper-local agreements on water sharing, pasture rotation, and maintenance, reviving traditional conflict management mechanisms.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Ulan Kasymov & Ahmad Hamidov (2017), “Comparative Analysis of Nature-Related Transactions and Governance Structures in Pasture Use and Irrigation Water in Central Asia”, *Sustainability*, 9(9), pp. 1-18.

Success in these micro-level functional cooperations can build a bedrock of trust and create tangible proof of concept, making larger agreements more feasible.

In the context of technical and financial support for joint, interest-based infrastructure, the international community must champion and fund joint technical projects that transform points of conflict into platforms for cooperation. This involves co-designing and financing:

- Modernized, Water-Efficient Irrigation Systems: Replacing leaky Soviet canals with piped or drip irrigation systems that benefit communities on both sides of the border, directly addressing the scarcity issue.
- Joint Water Monitoring and Data-Sharing Platforms: Establishing neutral, technical bodies equipped with shared technology to monitor water flow and quality, depoliticizing data, and creating a basis for equitable allocation.

This functionalist approach, rooted in environmental peace-building theory, creates mutual gains and institutionalizes cooperation around shared material interests.⁵⁹

Instead of sustained investment in Track-II diplomacy and people-to-people initiatives, to counter the destructive power of nationalist narratives identified in our discourse analysis, long-term investment is required in soft diplomacy. This includes:

- Funding academic and professional exchanges, joint university programs, and cross-border research projects.
- Supporting independent media initiatives that produce collaborative journalism, countering divisive state-sponsored rhetoric.
- Creating platforms for business leaders to develop cross-border economic ventures that demonstrate the commercial benefits of open borders and stability. These efforts, aimed at civil society, are essential for dismantling the "us vs. them" dichotomies and creating a constituency for peace that can pressure governments from below.⁶⁰

This study, by relying on document analysis, opens several critical avenues for further investigation:

⁵⁹ Ken Conca & Geoffrey D. Dabelko (eds.) (2002), *Environmental Peacemaking*, pp. 22-25.

⁶⁰ John Paul Lederach (1997), *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, United States Institute of Peace Press, p. 85.

In the context of ethnographic fieldwork in border regions, urgent research is needed that involves conducting immersive fieldwork, conducting interviews and surveys with farmers, soldiers, local officials, and residents in flashpoints like Vorukh. This is essential for moving beyond state-level narratives to understand the lived experience of the conflict, the informal economies it creates, and the localized logic of cooperation and conflict.

Rather than a critical geopolitical analysis of China's role, the growing influence of China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) warrants a dedicated study. Future research should analyze whether China's significant economic investments create new leverage for conflict resolution or whether its strict principle of non-interference leads it to prioritize stability over justice, thereby entrenching the status quo and undermining Western-led mediation efforts.

As regards to a quantitative cost-benefit analysis, a rigorous economic study calculating the precise costs of the conflict (e.g., military expenditure, lost trade, infrastructure damage, aid diversion) versus the projected benefits of peace (e.g., increased cross-border trade, tourism revenue, reduced security costs) would provide a powerful, evidence-based tool for advocates of reconciliation within both governments.

In conclusion, resolving the Kyrgyz-Tajik dispute requires abandoning the illusion that it can be solved solely through border demarcation. A sustainable solution must simultaneously address the historical institutional framework, the material distribution of resources, and the potent narratives of identity. By adopting a multi-track strategy that empowers local communities, builds shared infrastructure, and fosters human connectivity, the international community can finally help break the vicious cycle that has kept the Ferghana Valley on a knife's edge for three decades.

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