

Increase in tensions in the Fergana Valley

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On 11 January in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, in the southern part of the Fergana Valley, clashes broke out between Kyrgyz and Tajik border guard troops, involving the use of mortars. As a result five Kyrgyz and three Tajik soldiers were injured. Each side has blamed the other for causing the incident, and for a desire to interrupt the process of stabilising the border area. At present the situation is calm, but Kyrgyzstan has closed all border crossings to Tajikistan and recalled its ambassador to Dushanbe.

Commentary

- The problem of the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan primarily concerns the boundaries of the Tajik enclave of Vorukh (located on the territory of Kyrgyzstan), which have not been fully delimited, and where the clashes took place. In addition, Kyrgyzstan's transport and water infrastructure crosses the borders of the enclave, which often results in conflicts between the local communities. Tensions have also been strengthened by ethnic animosities, rising nationalism (especially in Kyrgyzstan), the weakness of the state and its structures, and the tendency to solve problems by force, among other factors.
- The latest clashes represent the largest border incident in the region for years, but the same problem is chronic throughout the Fergana Valley; areas on the borders of Uzbekistan with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are also tense. This particular event shows how local tensions (in this case, the construction of a road) can quickly turn into animosities between states. Attempts to solve the problem at the bilateral level have proved ineffective: on 7 January the deputy prime ministers of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan reached an agreement to accelerate the delimitation process, resolve local conflicts more effectively, and initiate joint border patrols, but nevertheless the clashes broke out four days later.
- The border incidents and the diplomatic crisis between Bishkek and Dushanbe serve to weaken the region's overall stability. The increase in regional tensions also threatens China's economic interests: despite Beijing's serious commitment to the economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, it cannot directly influence the security situation in these countries. For its part Russia, despite having the necessary instruments, does not seem to be interested in mitigating the conflict. Moscow is actively affecting the balance of power in the region, by means such as giving military assistance (including arms) to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the values of US\$1.2 billion and US\$300 million respectively.

Together with the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO, a military alliance of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia), Russia is also often seen as having responsibility for the region's stability, as shown for example by calls from Tajikistan for Russia and the CSTO to join in the process of easing the regional tensions and suspending further arms deliveries to Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, the tensions do not directly affect Russia's interests, and they potentially allow Moscow to exploit the conflict in accordance with its own objectives (one such would be the return of Russian border troops to the Tajik-Afghan border, to which Dushanbe has not yet given its consent).