

KAZAKHSTAN AND CHINA: THE PROBLEM OF TRANSBOUNDARY RIVERS

Malik AUGAN

*D.Sc. (Hist.), Professor,
Department of International Relations and World Economy,
Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
(Almaty, Republic of Kazakhstan)*

Tolganay ORMYSHEVA

*MA (International Relations),
Department of International Relations and World Economy,
Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
(Almaty, Republic of Kazakhstan)*

Fatima KUKKEVA

*D.Sc. (Hist.), Professor,
Department of International Relations and World Economy,
Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
(Almaty, Republic of Kazakhstan)*

Duman ZHEKENOV

*Ph.D., Department of International Relations and World Economy,
Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
(Almaty, Republic of Kazakhstan)*

ABSTRACT

About twenty rivers cross the Sino-Kazakh border, the biggest of them being the Ili and the Irtysh. For several years running, China has been steadily increasing water withdrawal, pushing Kazakhstan and the Russian part of Siberia towards an ecological disaster. This makes negotiations a must for both countries, yet Beijing prefers to talk separately to Moscow and Astana. In recent years, Kazakhstan and China have

added more vigor to their cooperation on water-related issues: they have already signed a great number of agreements and set up workgroups and commissions, yet mutually acceptable solutions are nowhere in sight. In this paper we have assessed what has been done to move closer to water-related agreements and in which way the joint structures bring the sides closer to relatively rational use of water resources.

The article was prepared within the AP05131047 project.

KEYWORDS: *China, Kazakhstan, water resources, transboundary rivers, Ili, Irtysh.*

Introduction

Water knows no political borders; this means that water management is one of the permanent factors of interstate relations. Conflicts are resolved through numerous agreements, yet tension remains. In most cases, management of transboundary water resources and security issues are intertwined, which means that the sides should try to avoid water-related conflicts and demonstrate efficiency when dealing with them.

The geographic location of China and Kazakhstan suggests that they should manage their water resources jointly and pay special attention to the water intake from the Ili and Irtysh rivers.

The experts on both sides of the border have very different ideas about water-related issues. Seen from Kazakhstan, water intake on the Chinese side seems to be a security threat, while Chinese experts are convinced that the official statements of Kazakhstan are caused by inefficient water management on its side of the border.

The authors have analyzed how bilateral Sino-Kazakhstan relations were unfolding in the sphere of water withdrawal from the transboundary rivers to answer the question of whether water intake and ecological security are a stumbling block in the relationships between the two countries or a chance to deepen their bilateral relations.

1. What Transboundary Rivers Mean for China

At the turn of the 1980s, China increased its water intake from the Irtysh, while the very different approaches to the issue of Moscow and Beijing made an interstate agreement impossible.

Thirty out of thirty-two Chinese megapolises are water-deficient; “over half of the Chinese cities” survive in the conditions of a permanent water shortage.¹

In 1990, China started its Project 635: a 300 km-long and 22 meter-wide canal between the Black Irtysh and Karamay rivers to bring water from the upper reaches of the Irtysh to the Ulungur Lake. Today, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China pours between 10 and 40% of the Irtysh runoff into its agriculture and industry. This water has added about 140,000 hectares to the irrigated agricultural lands and is used by the industrial enterprises of the Karamay oil basin.²

The strategic development plan for China’s western regions adopted in 1999³ threw the gap between the scarcity of natural resources and the ambitions of Chinese leaders into bold relief.

Today, China extracts about 500 million cubic meters of water every year; in 2020, when the project is completed it will withdraw up to 1 bcm with negative or extremely negative effects for the

¹ See: V. Gelbras, “Rossia i Kitay: voprosy sobirania geoeconomicheskikh prostranstv,” *Polis*, No. 6, 1995, pp. 44-45.

² See: M. Laruelle, S. Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia. Domestic Order, Social Change and the Chinese Factor*, Hurst & Company, London, 2012.

³ See: Y. Zhanghuai, Z. Zheyang, Ch. Weishan, “Per Capita GDP of Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai Reaches Level of Wealthy Countries,” *Current Digest of the Chinese Press*, No. 9, 2012, pp. 18-20.

economy and the social sphere of Kazakhstan and the Russian regions along the Ob, of which the Irtysh is the main tributary.⁴

China uses the rivers of the Ili basin to irrigate 400,000 hectares and plans to increase the irrigated area to 600,000 hectares.⁵ Xinjiang has already acquired the Kapchagay Reservoir 15 km above the spot where the Tekes flows into the Ili. Construction began in 2001; today the water storage of 1.2 bcm has been filled practically to capacity. The Chinese side insists that it needs the reservoir to irrigate agricultural lands, produce electric power and, moreover, protect Kazakhstan from floods and mud flows. We should bear in mind, however, that the People's Republic of China controls 100% of water that reaches Kazakhstan from the Ili.⁶

Today, China is talking about a 174 meter-high dam on the Kunges with the flow volume of 6 bcm. The project of a drainage channel from the Ili to the Tarim in the south of XUAR looks like a potential headache. A drainage channel on the Ili River is under construction. It will begin at Kensai (the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture), cross the Boro-Khoro pass to reach Jing, not far from the Boro-tala city (the Bortala Mongol Autonomous Prefecture). It comprises a big dam and a three-stage hydropower station; it is also planned to channel the water of the Ili tributaries—the Tekes, Kunges and Kash rivers—to the drying out salt Ebi Lake in the Bortala Mongol Autonomous Prefecture. In the near future, water intake from the Ili might reach 70% of the water flow.⁷

2. What Transboundary Rivers Mean for Kazakhstan

The Irtysh and the Ili are two out of three navigable rivers in Kazakhstan. Both are an important source of fresh water; both are very important for the republic's economy and, together with the Irtysh-Karaganda channel, they bring drinking water to the cities of Astana, Karaganda, Semipalatinsk, Pavlodar, Ekibastuz, Temirtau and the agricultural lands of Central Kazakhstan.⁸ If the water level drops lower, the production potential of the Bukhtarma, Ust-Kamenogorsk and Shulbinsk hydropower stations along the Irtysh will at best drop; at worst, they may be stopped altogether.

China's increased water intake has already lowered the water level of the Ili River with even graver economic, social and sociological consequences for the southeast of Kazakhstan and the rest of the country. Indeed, the Ili brings 80% of the total water flow to Lake Balkhash, the world's fifteenth largest lake. The river abounds in fish; its delta is a hunting place for muskrats.⁹ In Kazakhstan the river is navigable from the state border to Bakanas; in its lower reaches boats are used. The Ili and its tributaries are highly important for irrigation. The Ulken-Almaty canal (between Shilik and Shemolgan) is used for irrigation, pasture watering and for everyday, industrial and hydropower purposes.¹⁰

⁴ See: M. Laruelle, S. Peyrouse, op. cit.

⁵ See: G. Zholamanova, "Rol Shanghayskoy organizatsii sotrudnichestva v uregulirovaniy problema transgranichnykh rek mezhdru Kazakhstanom i Kitaem," *Analytic*, No. 1, 2007, pp. 35-36.

⁶ See: T. Baymukhambetov, "Vodianaia melnitsa zaskripela: vialotekushchie kazakhstano-kitayskie peregovory o transgranichnykh rekakh sdvinulis s mertvoy tochki?" *Ekspres-K*, 245(16393), 2008.

⁷ See: D. Rakhmetov, "Besprosvetny vodozabor," *V[o]x Populi*, No. 9, 2009, pp. 41-42.

⁸ See: "Transgranichnoe sotrudnichestvo na mezhduarodnykh rekakh: problemy, opyt, uroki, prognozy ekspertov," available at [http://www.cawater-info.net/bk/water_law/8_3.htm].

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ See: A.E. Baymaganbetov, "Opreделение osnovnykh parametrov selevykh potokov nekotorykh vodotokov, pereseikau-shchikh trassu Bolshogo Almatinskogo Kanala im. Kunaeva," available at [<http://repo.kstu.kz:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/1735/Баймаганбетов%20Опр%20осн%20пара%20селе%20потков%20некот%20водот%20пере%20трассу.pdf?sequence=1>].

There is the Akdala irrigation region with the total area of about 30 thousand hectares, 10 thousand hectares being used for rice cultivation.¹¹

The Kapchagay hydropower station on the Ili supplies the republic's south with desperately needed electric power. The water of the Ili is the main source of irrigation in the Almaty Region, where technical cultures are grown in large quantities.

The above means that a lower water level in the transboundary rivers, unbalanced ecological systems, irrational use of water by the local people might deteriorate their living conditions, slow down economic growth of the entire country and even cause ecological catastrophes.

In the absence of clear-cut international standards and criteria for the use of transboundary river water resources, the problem is growing even more complicated than it looks at first glance. The existing documents—the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context and the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes are related mainly to environmental aspects and touch upon the water problem in passing. The Helsinki Rules on the Uses of the Waters of International Rivers and the protocols to it (the London Protocol on Water and Health and the Kiev Protocol on Civil Liability and Compensation for Damage Caused by the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents on Transboundary Waters) are similar to the above-mentioned conventions.

3. Water Talks between Kazakhstan and China: Main Stages

The problem of joint use of the transboundary river water figures prominently in bilateral negotiations. So far, they have gone through three main stages.

3.1. The First Stage (1992-1999): The Problem of Transboundary Rivers is Actualized in the Kazakhstan Discourse

From the first days of its independence, Kazakhstan has been talking about the redistribution of water resources of transboundary rivers as ecologically risky. Many international environmental organizations, UNDP among them, sided with Kazakhstan in its disagreements with China. It was absolutely clear that the decreased runoff from the Ili may bring Lake Balkhash on the brink of disaster comparable to that which had happened to the Sea of Aral.¹²

Fully aware of the threats, the republican authorities and the public were actively discussing possible solutions.¹³ By 1992, the problem of transboundary rivers was high up on the list of priorities for the republic's leaders. They offered the Chinese side a list of suggestions related to the officially registered principles of joint and rational use of transboundary water resources.

Two years later, Kazakhstan laid on the table a draft of an intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in navigation on transboundary rivers to promote foreign trade and tourist exchange. It

¹¹ See: K.M. Kurmashev, M.Kh. Sarsenbaev, "Vodny balans Akdalinskogo massiva oroshenia," available at [<http://nblib.library.kz/elib/library.kz/journal/Kurmashev%20Sarsenbaev.pdf>].

¹² See: M. Laruelle, S. Peyrouse, *op. cit.*

¹³ See: "Vlasti Pavlodara prosiat spasti ot obmelenia reku Irtysh," available at [<http://www.zakon.kz/4489383-vlasti-pavlodara-prosjat-spasti-ot.html>].

took Beijing five years to study the draft; meanwhile, Kazakhstan persistently invited the Chinese side to the negotiation table: the catastrophic economic and ecological effects of China's one-sided increase of water intake from the Ili and the Irtysh had become obvious.¹⁴

In 1997, the CC of the CPC approved an important initiative from below: the timetable of the "reversal" of the Black Irtysh based on Project 635 endorsed by the XUAR government named 1 October, 1999 as the projected date of the project's completion. The Ili and the Tekes, two other transboundary rivers, were identified as the next objects.

Late in 1998, the Ust-Kamenogorsk maslikhat voiced its great concern over the news that, contrary to earlier information about a canal, China was digging a 20 meter-wide drainage channel to bring drinking water to central Xinjiang and to supply the Karamay oil fields with water for industrial needs. The Chinese expected to retain 20% of the total runoff of the Black Irtysh. According to Kazakhstan ecologists, the loss of 5 to 6% of the runoff would put an end to Lake Zaysan and the Bukhtarma Reservoir.

3.2. The Second Stage (1999-2009): Kazakhstan and China Start Talking; A Joint Commission on Transboundary Rivers is Set Up

In January 1999, deputies of the Majilis (parliament) of Kazakhstan joined the discussion. When invited to one of the sessions, the Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Kassym Tokayev offered no details: he explained that there was no treaty in place between the two countries, yet the negotiations on the transboundary rivers were going on unabated.

In March 1999, speaking at the Institute of Eastern Europe and Central Asia of the Academy of Social Sciences of the PRC Ambassador of Kazakhstan to China, Kuanysh Sultanov, cautiously touched upon the problem of transboundary rivers. He pointed out that according to world practice and international laws, the issues related to the joint use of similar objects should be discussed; the sides should arrive at coordinated plans and programs and sign documents. He referred to the case of the Danube that flowed across at least half of the European states, never causing serious problems. The audience, comprised of Chinese academics and officials, paid attention; the press service of the Chinese Foreign Ministry reported that Chinese scholars had agreed that continued postponement of the talks would do no good to international relations.

During the 1999 visit of President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev to China the Kazakhstan leaders once again voiced their deep concerns regarding the problem and strongly objected to the steadily decreasing runoff of the Black Irtysh.

Talks began in May 1999; the sides set up a Joint Workgroup of experts on transboundary rivers.

Persistence of the Kazakhstan diplomats was rewarded with considerable progress. Bigaliy Turarbekov, Councilor of the Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan who supervised the process admitted that "Beijing demonstrated understanding ... earlier the Chinese side had pretended that the problem had not existed. It finally agreed that the use of transboundary rivers on one side of the border should not inflict losses on the other side." The Chinese Embassy to Kazakhstan and the Foreign Ministry of People's Republic of China confirmed that China had embraced new approaches to the issue.¹⁵

¹⁴ See: N. Aydarov, "O kazakhstano-kitayskom peregovornom protsesse po transgranichnym rekam," *Diplomaticheskyy kurier*, No. 2, 2000, pp. 102-104.

¹⁵ See: A. Mukhambetiarova, "Kazakhstan-Kitay: reshenie vodnoy problemy opiat otkladyvaetsia," *Agentstvo politicheskikh issledovaniy*, available at [<http://www.caapr.kz/show.php.kza1104-01.htm>].

After several rounds of talks and meetings of the workgroups that discussed the problems of the joint use of transboundary rivers, the two sides' positions moved closer. They registered the volumes of China's water intake, coordinated the criteria of the assessment of water quality, etc.

Despite the fact that the process has not achieved the final aim, the signed agreement can be described as a positive outcome of diplomatic effort that determines the future of the relationship between the two states and serves as a firm foundation on which disagreements can be settled.¹⁶

Bilateral relations in water control are based on the Agreement on Cooperation in the Use and Protection of Transboundary Rivers between the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Government of the People's Republic of China dated 12 September, 2001, realized by a Joint Commission on the Use and Protection of Transboundary Rivers. As a result, several documents have already been signed related to the problem that belongs to international legislation.¹⁷

On 4 July, 2005, China and Kazakhstan signed a joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership that envisaged, among other things, rational use and protection of water resources of transboundary rivers,¹⁸ thus making both countries responsible for further developments. Their bilateral relations were specified by the Cooperation Strategy between Kazakhstan and China in the 21st century signed in December 2006 and the Concept of the Development of Bilateral Economic Cooperation.

In October 2005, Shanghai hosted the third meeting of the Joint Commission on the Use and Protection of Transboundary Rivers that discussed the expansion of the contractual legal framework regarding transboundary rivers.

In January 2006, during the Astana visit of the Deputy Chairman of the PRC Zeng Qinghong the sides announced that they were ready to invigorate their cooperation on the basis of the decisions of the Joint Commission.¹⁹

In February 2006, Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Water Resources of the Ministry of Agriculture of Kazakhstan Amirkhan Kenshimov announced that China had agreed in principle to sign an agreement on water discharge of the Irtysh and Ili rivers. A workgroup was set up to discuss and identify the volumes of water discharge from China required for everyday and industrial needs and for ecological balance in both riverbeds.²⁰

In early April 2006, Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev visited China and once again raised the transboundary river issue in his discussions with the Prime Minister of the State Council of the PRC Wen Jiabao. The Chinese official pointed out that the problem should be

¹⁶ See: V.I. Fokin, S.S. Shirin, J.V. Nikolaeva, N.M. Bogolubova, E.E. Elts, V.N. Baryshnikov, "Interaction of Cultures and Diplomacy of States," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, No. 38 (1), 2017, pp. 45-49, available at [<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.kjss.2016.05.001>].

¹⁷ See: Agreement of 4 July, 2005 between the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Water Economy of the People's Republic of China on urgent information of the sides about natural calamities on the transboundary rivers (Astana). Enacted on 4 July, 2005, *Bulletin of International Agreements of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, Astana, No. 5, 2005, pp. 103-105; Agreement of 20 December, 2006 between the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Water Economy of the People's Republic of China on the development of scientific-research activities on the transboundary rivers (Beijing). Enacted on 20 December, 2006, *Bulletin of International Agreements of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, Astana, No. 1, 2007, pp. 95-97; Agreement of 20 December, 2006 between the Ministry of Environmental Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Water Economy of the People's Republic of China on mutual exchange of hydrological and hydrochemical information (data) obtained from the hydroposts on the main transboundary rivers (Beijing). Enacted on 20 December, 2006, *Bulletin of International Agreements of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, Astana, No. 1, 2007, pp. 98-99 (all in Russian).

¹⁸ See: Joint Declaration of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China on establishing and development of strategic partnership, *Bulletin of International Agreements of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, Astana, No. 5, 2005, p. 111 (in Russian).

¹⁹ See: Joint Kazakhstan-Chinese Communique, Kazinform Information Agency, Astana, 2006, available in Russian at [<http://inform.kz/>].

²⁰ See: D. Pokidaev, "Vodorazdel," *Izvestia-Kazakhstan*, 13 February, 2006.

settled in the long-term interests of both countries, that it was highly important to preserve the ecological balance and rational use of water resources in the interests of the people of both states.²¹

On 20 December, 2006, the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Water Economy of the PRC signed an Agreement on the Development of Scientific and Research Cooperation on the Transboundary Rivers in Beijing; the Ministry of Environmental Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Water Economy of China signed an agreement on mutual exchange of hydrological and hydrochemical information (data) obtained from the border hypoposts on the main transboundary rivers (Beijing). The Cooperation Strategy between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan for the 21st Century signed during the visit said, in particular: "Both sides speak highly of the achievements by the China-Kazakhstan joint committee for the utilization and protection of trans-border rivers. Both sides will, in the principle of equity and soundness, continue the cooperation under the existing mechanism and set down specific relevant measures so as to ensure the reasonable utilization and protection of trans-border rivers and biological resources and safeguard the tangible benefits of both sides in various fields."²²

The joint communique signed in August 2007 confirmed the earlier agreements and stressed that the sides' mutual interests should be ensured; it was decided to further cooperate on the construction of the Dostyk hydropower station on the Khorgos.²³ It should be said, however, that in 2007 XUAR unilaterally discharged the water of the Ulken-Lasty, thus depriving three economic regions of eastern Kazakhstan (Maykapchagay, Dosym and Umbetay) of water. The akimat of the Zaysan District tried unsuccessfully to talk to the administration of the Ili-Kazakh Autonomous District of XUAR that has violated the intergovernmental agreement of 2002 by its refusal to talk.²⁴

In early 2008, the talks on the joint use of transboundary water resources started moving in the right direction: the Kazakhstan delegation, headed by Vice Minister of Agriculture Dulat Aytjanov, finally reached an understanding with the Chinese partners on a draft agreement on water quality control and prevention of water pollution. The Chinese side received a text of the Concept on the Interstate Distribution of Water Resources of the Transboundary Rivers between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China, elaborated by Astana. The Kazakhstan delegation insisted that the expert workgroups should gather for their next meeting in Xinjiang, rather than in the city of Dalian, as the Chinese side had suggested. The final protocol contained the points related to mutual inspections of water-use structures on transboundary rivers scheduled for July-August 2008 and the continued practice of exchange of inspections of hydrochemical laboratories and technological exchange.²⁵

In October 2008, after the Astana visit of the Prime Minister of the State Council of the PRC Wen Jiabao, the Joint Commission on the Use and Protection of Transboundary Rivers became part of the Sino-Kazakh Cooperation Committee. The joint communique said, in particular, that in the future the sides would continue the practice of joint settlement of the issues related to the use and protection of the transboundary rivers on the basis of the principles of high responsibility and mutual gain.²⁶

The new package of agreements can be described as a progress of sorts.

²¹ See: N. Gilt, "Otkrytaia dver v kitayskoy stene," *Izvestia-Kazakhstan*, 13 February, 2006.

²² "The Cooperation Strategy between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan for the 21st Century," available at [<http://www.chinaembassy.org/nz/eng/xw/t285011.htm>]

²³ See: "Joint Communique of the People's Republic of China and Kazakhstan Republic," available in Russian at [<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/rus/wjdt/gb/t353708.shtml>].

²⁴ See: D. Rakhmetov, *op. cit.*

²⁵ See: T. Baymukhambetov, *op. cit.*

²⁶ See: "Joint Communique of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan, 31 October, 2008," available in Russian at [http://russian.china.org.cn/international/txt/2008-10/31/content_16697733.htm].

3.3. The Third Stage (late 2009-the present): Kazakhstan's Involvement in the Customs Union and EAEU as a Factor of New Geopolitics in the Region

The statements made by Hu Jintao during his visit to Kazakhstan on 12 December, 2009 ignited cautious optimism. Speaking about the transboundary river problem he said that “China will never infringe on the interests of Kazakhstan” and added that he hoped that “the discussions of bilateral use of the transboundary water resources within the framework of the bilateral commission would allow the sides to sign a corresponding document on these issues some time soon.”²⁷

In January 2010, the representative of the Foreign Ministry of China Ma Zhaoxu confirmed that his country attached special importance to strategic partnership in the development of and progress in the use of transboundary river water resources and stressed the importance of their rational use and protection.²⁸

A joint Sino-Kazakh project of an 11 km-long canal, which would also provide irrigation for more than 40,000 hectares of land on both sides of the border, can be described as the first result that took both sides' interests into account. “In 2003, the Kazakh authorities decided upon the reinforcement of the banks of the river level with the village of Khorgos to avoid regular flooding. In order to control the flow of the river, the construction of several dikes has been tabled, on the model of China which already has 25 km of dikes on its side of the river. A project to construct a Sino-Kazakh hydroelectric station called Dostyk (“Friendship”) was negotiated in 2005. This electricity station is to be made up of a cascade of small stations with a combined capacity of 21 MW and situated near the village of Baskunchi 20 km from Khorgos.”²⁹

In April 2013, speaking at the Boao Forum for Asia, Xi Jinping called on his Central Asian neighbors not to be afraid of changes and innovations. In September, while on a visit in Kazakhstan, the Chinese leader formulated a new idea—the Silk Road Economic Belt, which would revitalize cooperation between China and the Central Asian countries.

The visit brought over 20 contracts in the amount of about \$30 billion and the Joint Declaration on the Development of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, the program of mid- and long-term trade and economic cooperation between the two countries up to the year 2020. The sides agreed to continue negotiations on the use of transboundary water.³⁰

The two countries are contemplating cooperation in the use of new energy sources, high technologies and hydropower in Kazakhstan economy; they signed an agreement on the Kerbulak Hydro-power Stations on the transboundary Ili River.

The results of Xi Jinping's Central Asian tour of September 2013 meant that China has resolved to increase its presence in Eurasia, read: greater involvement in the region's economy and integration.

The Chinese leader pointed out that “China and Kazakhstan should take opportunities and strengthen communication, trade, road connections, currency circulation between the two countries,

²⁷ L. Tusupbekova, “Kazakhstan i Kitay podelili transgranichnye reki. Itogi peregovorov Hu Jintao i N. Nazarbayeva v Astane,” *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 15 December, 2009.

²⁸ See: “MID KNR pridaet serioznoe znachenie ratsionalnomu ispolzovaniiu i okhrane vodnykh resursov kitaysko-kazakhstanskikh transgranichnykh rek,” China.org, available at [http://russian.china.org.cn/government/txt/2010-01/29/content_19328048.htm], 29 January, 2010.

²⁹ S. Peyrouse, “The Hydroelectric Sector in Central Asia and the Growing Role of China,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, No. 5 (2), 2007, p. 138.

³⁰ See: “Kazakhstan i Kitay podpisali riad dvustoronnikh dokumentov,” available at [<http://dknews.kz/kazakhstan-i-kitajj-podpisali-ryad-dvustoronnikh-dokumentov.html>].

as well as mutual understanding of the two peoples, which would help spur other nations to join in the construction of the economic belt.”³¹

The concept of the Silk Road Economic Belt devised by the Chinese leader implies its possible coordination with the Eurasian Economic Union. If China persists in promoting the idea, it will have to revise its approaches to the problem of transboundary rivers on the borders with Kazakhstan and Russia.

4. Possible Solutions as Seen by the Sides

China, as the country in the upper reaches of transboundary rivers, is not involved in any of the multilateral international treaties on transboundary rivers; it is highly unlikely that it will rely on corresponding international experience. In fact, Beijing insists on individual approaches to each case; procrastination is another traditional instrument of Chinese diplomacy.

There is a more or less generally accepted opinion that Beijing is exploiting the current context as an instrument of pressure on Kazakhstan when addressing its own important strategic tasks.

An agreement between Kazakhstan and China on the rational use and protection of transboundary rivers presumes that the problem would be resolved between the two countries and that Russia, despite being one of the interested sides, would be excluded from the talks.

While haggling with China over the ways the water resources of the Irtysh were being used, Kazakhstan hoped that Russia would side with it, since the Irtysh crosses part of the Russian territory before it flows into the Ob. Moscow, however, has either pushed aside the problem as unimportant or is using it to keep Kazakhstan on a short leash.

It should be said that Beijing, Astana and Moscow would have gained a lot if the Siberian rivers were reversed to the arid regions of Central Asia and possibly to XUAR. We fully agree with this variant.

Having emerged in the early 20th century, this idea was actively discussed in the 1970s-1980s, the time when the Soviet leaders dreamed of huge projects and when man “waged an offensive against nature.” In his time, Yuri Luzhkov, a prominent Russian political and public figure, went even further: he suggested that a reservoir should be built in the Russian territory within the natural drainage divide between the Irtysh and Ob basins to gather water from the upper reaches of the Ob and other rivers.³² We are convinced that Kazakhstan and probably XUAR will thus get more water. In fact, the development of this autonomous region of China will add security and economic stability to the region. Stanislav Zhukov, for example, has written that Xinjiang is rapidly developing into one of the main centers of economic activities of Greater Central Asia that includes Xinjiang, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, neighboring parts of Russia and, to a certain extent, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.³³

The leaders of China are in principle prepared to discuss and gradually promote the projects of relevant agreements proposed by Kazakhstan. Very soon the Chinese side will introduce its amendments to the draft Concept on the Interstate Distribution of Water Resources of the Transboundary Rivers between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the People’s Republic of China.

³¹ “Chinese President Meets Speaker of Kazakh Parliament,” *People’s Daily Online*, available at [<http://en.people.cn/90883/8426479.html>].

³² See: D. Pisarenko, A. Uglanov, “Sredniuiu Aziu spasit Luzhkov?” *Argumenty i fakty*, No. 5, 2002, p. 20.

³³ See: S.V. Zhukov, O.B. Reznikova, *Tsentralnaia Azia i Kitay: ekonomicheskoe vzaimodeystvie v usloviakh globalizatsii*, IMEMO RAN, Moscow, 2009.

Geopolitical changes are highly important in this context. The Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia set up in 2010 and the Eurasian Economic Union of the three countries (Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined later) that started functioning on 1 January, 2015 will inevitably affect the nature of the Sino-Kazakh relationship. We cannot say so far that Beijing has finally abandoned its positions on water use and protection of transboundary rivers; it has demonstrated its readiness to take the interests of Kazakhstan and new geopolitics into account for the simple reason that it wants to preserve its economic interests in Kazakhstan. Indeed, economic and geopolitical security is more important than the issue of transboundary rivers. Beijing, however, is ready to move towards a common approach to it.

Conclusions

It is abundantly clear that the use of water of the Ili and the Irtysh is a fairly complicated problem created by the actions of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan. The agreements that have already been concluded allow us to address practically the entire set of problems related to quality control, water intake and the ecology of transboundary rivers, yet it is not that easy to implement them: so far the sides have not arrived at a common ground on the issue of securitization of the water problem; bilateral negotiations have not yielded any consequential results; the Kazakh side is displeased with the earlier agreements that did not take its interests into account; there is no agreement on the amount of water withdrawal on the part of China, while the ideas about water management are too different to be harmonized.

The way the water of the Khorgos was divided cannot be fully applied to other transboundary rivers: the drainage divide of the transboundary Khorgos River differs a lot from the drainage divide of the Ili and the Irtysh.

Despite the very complicated problem of the use of transboundary river water resources by the two states, the new geopolitical reality in the post-Soviet territory forces Beijing to choose one of the two options: either the status quo related to the Ili and the Irtysh rivers and the permanently aggravating problem, or taking the interests of Kazakhstan into account for the sake of China's continued economic influence in Kazakhstan and Central Asia.