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Central Asian Land and China

May 2, 2016 - 1:57pm, by *Bruce Pannier* [China](#) [Kazakhstan](#) [Kyrgyzstan](#) [Tajikistan](#)

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One topic guaranteed to inflame passions in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan is land and China. China has taken land from Central Asia and farmers from China are already working rented fields in Central Asia and that has not sat well with locals.

It's playing a role in the recent widespread protests in Kazakhstan. Personally I'm inclined to agree with those who see Kazakhstan as a simmering pot at the moment. There are many issues right now that are causing discontent in Kazakhstan. The issue of privatization of land and suggestion Chinese might acquire, even temporarily, some of that land just turned up the heat a bit under the simmering pot.

Which makes it the more surprising that Kazakhstan's government, faced with its worst economic crisis in some 20 years, would choose at this time to bring up land privatization and not make crystal clear from word one that foreigners, including Chinese, could not own any of Kazakhstan's land.

Officials are paying for that and now are working overtime to explain the privatization plan and soothe the tensions that erupted when rumors spread that Chinese workers would be coming for Kazakhstan's farmland.

Such concerns on the part of people in Kazakhstan, and in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also, are not without foundation.

And to see why, we need to go back some 20 years to an agreement aimed at easing tensions.

In late April 1996, the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan met in Shanghai to sign an agreement to pull back military forces from the former Sino-Soviet, now Sino-CIS border. It was a confidence-building gesture. The deal was cemented with a decision to form the Shanghai Five, which five years later and with the addition of Uzbekistan, became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Many Central Asian analysts have noted the SCO became China's vehicle for entering Central Asia economically and now China is at least a, if not the, leading trade partner of all five Central Asian states.

The Shanghai Five agreement also opened the door for China to make claims on land along its borders with Central Asia. The 1996 deal essentially scrapped the line that was the Sino-Soviet border and necessitated new demarcations. Then-Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in July 1996 to discuss the delimitation. Jiang skipped Tajikistan, which was three years into its civil war at the time.

By early 1999, Kazakhstan was prepared to cede nearly half of the 34,000 square kilometers of what China claimed was disputed territory.

It was a very unpopular decision in Kazakhstan. There were legitimate opposition deputies in parliament back then, and there were also social movements and an independent media that, compared to today, had far more room to maneuver. These groups criticized the move.

State media repeatedly focused on the fact Kazakhstan had received "56.9 percent" of the disputed territory but critics pointed out that the remaining 43.1 percent had been Kazakhstan's land until the new deal with China.



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The Mazhilis, the lower house of parliament, passed the border treaty with China on February 3, 1999; the Senate passed it on March 10 and President Nursultan Nazarbaev signed it on March 24.

The Sino-Kyrgyz border agreement was more complicated. The deal for Kyrgyzstan to hand over 1,250 square kilometers of its land to China was signed in 1999.

There was ample, vocal opposition at the time, including calls to impeach then-President Askar Akaev, and it lasted for several years.

The demarcation process started in June 2001. Within days the parliament's Legislative Assembly, the lower house (Kyrgyzstan had a bicameral parliament then), voted to stop demarcation and then prepared a draft law denouncing the agreement.

It was not until late May 2002 that President Akaev finally had an agreement to sign and he left the next month to China to formalize it with Chinese officials. Even as late as February 2003 some Kyrgyz parliament deputies were demanding the agreement be rescinded.

Tajik Disputes

Tajikistan and China also signed a border-demarcation agreement in 1999, but it was not until 2002 that Tajikistan acknowledged it was prepared to cede some 1,122 square kilometers of disputed territory to China. As was the case in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, there were many opponents to the agreement in Tajikistan, including people in Tajikistan's eastern Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region. The land to be given to China was in Gorno-Badakhshan and the region's autonomous status technically demanded local approval of the deal.

Tajikistan's parliament did not finally approve the deal until January 2011 amid renewed criticism, particularly from the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which still had two seats in parliament at the time. IRPT Deputy Chairman Saidimir Husayni said at the time that "there should have been a referendum on the issue, as this area has never belonged to China. Tajikistan is recognized as an independent country by the UN." As for China's claim, Husayni dismissed it. "Such claims exist all over the world and they cannot be regarded as proof."

Local authorities in Gorno-Badakhshan were not consulted.

The issue resurfaced in April 2013, when the leader of the opposition Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan, Rahmatullo Zoirov, gave an interview to Iran's Radio Khorasan and said the Tajik government had given up more land than it admitted.

The Tajik government rejected Zoirov's statements, but then canceled the accreditation of three Radio Khorasan correspondents.

Less than one week after Tajikistan's parliament approved the controversial demarcation agreement with China, the Tajik government had other news. Some 2,000 hectares of land in the Khatlon region, vacated by migrant laborers who headed to Russia, was to be leased to Chinese farmers.

'Renting' No Better

And that brings us back to Kazakhstan and the possibility of Chinese farmers tilling Kazakhstan's soil. At the end of 2009, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev said China had requested renting up to 1 million hectares of land. That idea sparked protests and Kazakh officials spent the next many months denying Kazakhstan planned to "give" land to China.

So Kazakh officials should have known what would happen when land privatization was brought up in 2016. Qualifying the proposal by saying foreigners could only rent the land for up to 25 years is unlikely to assuage the population's fears that China intends to devour Kazakh lands.

Why would that work when China has already acquired 16,000 square kilometers of what was once Central Asian land in just the last 15 years?

RFE/RL's Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik services contributed to this report.

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