

Water wars in Central Asia

Dammed if they do

Spats over control of water roil an already unstable region

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TAJIKISTAN'S president, Emomali Rakhmon, likes things big. He has built the world's tallest flagpole. Last year he opened the region's largest library (with few books in it so far). But one gigantic project is proving contentious with the neighbours: building the world's tallest hydroelectric dam.

Islam Karimov, the strongman who rules downstream Uzbekistan, says the proposed 335-metre Rogun dam, on a tributary of the Amu Darya, will give Tajikistan unfair control over water resources and endanger millions in the event of an earthquake. On September 7th, he said such projects could lead to "not just serious confrontation, but even wars".

Mr Karimov wasn't talking only about Tajikistan. Upstream from Uzbekistan on a tributary of the region's other major river, the Syr Darya, Kyrgyzstan is seeking investment for a project of its own, called Kambarata. The two proposed dams (Rogun at 3.6 gigawatts and Kambarata at 1.9) would theoretically end their respective countries' frequent power shortages and provide badly needed export earnings.

Both were conceived in the twilight of the communist era and stalled when subsidies from Moscow evaporated at independence. Soviet leaders envisioned managing the region's water flows, energy trades and competing interests, and their Russian successors still maintain an interest. During a visit to Bishkek on September 20th, Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, promised help with Kambarata in exchange for, among other things, an extension of military-basing rights in



Kyrgyzstan. Tajikistan has sought Russian help for Rogun, too. Mr Putin promised \$2 billion for the dam in 2004. But that deal fell apart three years later, when the two countries could not agree about the dam's height.

Spurring on both projects is Uzbekistan's bad behaviour, egregious even in a tetchy region. Unlike Uzbekistan, neither Tajikistan nor Kyrgyzstan, the two poorest former Soviet republics, has reliable access to oil or gas. Uzbekistan's Mr Karimov has a habit of changing gas prices and cutting deliveries during the coldest months. He has prevented electricity supplies to his indigent neighbours from transiting his country's Soviet-era grid. Uzbekistan has also unilaterally closed most border checkpoints with both upstream countries, set mines along parts of the boundary with Tajikistan, and often holds up commercial traffic. When a rail bridge in southern Uzbekistan mysteriously exploded last autumn, depriving southern Tajikistan of its rail connections, few believed Uzbek claims of a terrorist attack. Indeed, rather than fix the track, the Uzbeks dismantled it. Tajikistan calls the actions a blockade.

Though it seems unlikely Mr Karimov will drive his tanks over the border just yet, shoot-outs on the disputed borders are not uncommon. All of this worries NATO officials. All three countries help supply the war in Afghanistan and will be crucial for NATO's withdrawal.

Few believe impoverished Tajikistan can build Rogun on its own. Its estimated cost of \$3 billion is nearly half the country's GDP. In 2010 Mr Rakhmon forced a resentful public to buy shares, but raised less than \$200m. And Uzbekistan's opposition to it has made potential investors, namely China and Russia, wary. If only Mr Rakhmon could settle for something less than the biggest, he would have a better chance of building his dam, and leading his people out of darkness too.

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