

Military conflicts on the borders of Central Asia in the 1990s–2020s: Causes, dynamics and historical lessons

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Abstract. Border conflicts in Central Asia throughout the 1990s–2020s constituted one of the key threats to regional stability in the post-Soviet space. The aim of this study was to conduct a multidimensional analysis of the causes, course, and consequences of armed border incidents between the states of Central Asia, particularly the Kyrgyz Republic, within the context of transformations in the geopolitical environment. The research methodology was based on a combination of historical-political, chronological, discourse analysis and case study approaches. The findings established that border conflicts have a complex nature, shaped by the Soviet legacy of national-territorial delimitation, the ethnopolitical interweaving of identities, unequal access to resources, and the institutional weakness of state structures. The Ferghana Valley, particularly the Batken Region of the Kyrgyz Republic, emerged as a particularly acute hotspot of conflict manifestations. The study revealed that competition between local and national interests contributed to escalation during seasonal flare-ups. The influence of international organisations on conflict de-escalation proved limited due to contradictions among participants and a low level of trust. Processes of delimitation and demarcation remain incomplete, especially along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. At the same time, local reconciliation practices demonstrate certain potential, though they require support from state institutions. The conclusions highlight that border conflicts serve as indicators of broader political and social transformations in the region and necessitate a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach to analysis. Effective stabilisation is only possible when historical experience and the interests of all ethnic groups in the region are taken into account. The practical significance of the study lies in the development of recommendations for preventing the escalation of border conflicts and creating sustainable mechanisms for regional security

Keywords: stateless persons; armed clashes; delimitation; demarcation; escalation; crisis response

Introduction

Between the 1990s and the 2020s, the border zones of Central Asia gradually became one of the most conflict-prone regions of the post-Soviet space. Despite the absence of large-scale interstate wars, border incidents, armed clashes, local uprisings, and protracted inter-ethnic disputes became regular occurrences in the region, often acquiring a cyclical character and recurring in different forms depending on the political conjuncture. Conflict manifested with particular acuteness in such states as the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, where competing ethnic interests, differing levels of state development, and competition for access to strategic resources converged. The geographical complexity of border demarcation, the existence of

numerous enclaves and exclaves, and historical problems linked to Soviet administrative-territorial divisions created multi-layered challenges for establishing a stable system of interstate relations. The uneven distribution of natural resources, above all water and arable land, became an additional factor of tension. In conditions of population growth and economic instability, control over resources defined the political and economic weight of border regions. In several cases, the social vulnerability of local populations, low levels of economic development, and weak governance institutions facilitated the transformation of border zones into spaces of competition for various illegal actors – from criminal groups to religious extremist organisations. The border

Suggested Citation:

Isaev, A. (2025). Military conflicts on the borders of Central Asia in the 1990s–2020s: Causes, dynamics and historical lessons. *Journal of Osh State University. History*, 4(2), 18–32. doi: 10.52754/1694867X_2025_4(2)_18.

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conflicts unfolding during the 1990s-2020s served as markers of deeper socio-political and geo-economic transformations, signalling shifts in power structures, redistribution of economic flows, and the reorientation of foreign policy strategies of Central Asian states.

Previous research into the border problems of the Kyrgyz Republic, and more broadly Central Asia, covers different dimensions but remains fragmented. Z.A. Musarova & C.U. Adamkulova (2023) explored the economic dimension, highlighting the marginalisation of peripheries, uneven infrastructural development, and dependence on external partners as factors of instability. The foreign policy perspective is traced in the monograph by K.H. Khan & H. Koch (2021), which examined the evolution of regional strategies from orientation towards Russia to Chinese, Turkish, and multi-vector courses. B. Buzan (2025) proposed three approaches to the periodisation of the military sphere – technological, orthodox, and global – stressing the underestimation of the latter, which, in his view, is key to understanding international security. In the works of R. Pradhan (2021) and A. Rahim *et al.* (2024), attention is focused on resource competition, particularly water conflicts between the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, in which China exerts significant influence through investment and credit mechanisms.

In the wider Eurasian context, B. Li (2024) argued that the Karabakh conflict cannot be explained solely by historical animosity. He demonstrated that political elites played a key role, manipulating nationalist narratives during the 1990s and in the military campaigns of 2020-2023 to consolidate their own power by exploiting institutional weakness. Similar conclusions were drawn by E. Klimov *et al.* (2024), who proposed a systematic classification of the causes of border conflicts. They identified three main groups: ethnic fragmentation, competition over resources (water, pastures, and arable land), and the inability of regulatory mechanisms to ensure stable dispute resolution. B. Hjermerman (2024) analysed the geopolitical dimension of conflict in Central Asia, which over the past three decades has remained an arena of competition between global and regional actors. The researcher showed that the multi-vector nature of foreign policy enabled authoritarian regimes to balance between centres of power, yet attempts to establish regional institutions failed due to the colonial legacy and lack of economic interdependence. In turn, S.B. Kirmse (2024) offered a historical-discursive reconstruction of the concept of “Central Asia”. He demonstrated how perceptions of the region in international and academic discourses shifted under the influence of geopolitical transformations, thereby reshaping interpretative frameworks. Finally, F. Kobilov (2025) examined the transformation of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy following the rise to power of Sh. Mirziyoyev. He argued that the new regional course emerged as the result of a combination of domestic

reforms and subregional factors, including economic needs, transit potential, and security challenges.

Despite the availability of a wide range of approaches – from political economy to cultural anthropology – there remains an evident lack of studies that integrate into a single analytical framework the dynamics of border conflicts in the Kyrgyz Republic, taking into account both internal (socio-economic, ethnopolitical, institutional) and external (geopolitical, security, regional-structural) determinants. A separate gap is the underdeveloped conceptual basis for comparing conflicts over time, which prevents the identification of patterns of escalation, recurrence, or de-escalation. In addition, the question of drawing lessons from history, which could underpin preventive security strategies, effective conflict prevention, and the long-term formation of stable border coexistence, remains insufficiently addressed.

The aim of this study was to carry out a comprehensive analysis of military conflicts along the borders of Central Asian states in the period from the 1990s to the 2020s, with a focus on identifying their causes, dynamics of development, and consequences in both geopolitical and domestic political contexts. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set: to analyse the evolution of border conflicts in connection with political transformations in the region; to identify the key actors, resources, and spatial zones of conflict activity; and to outline historical lessons for preventing the escalation of similar incidents in the future.

Materials and Methods

This research was based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to the study of the nature and dynamics of border conflicts in the Kyrgyz Republic during 1999-2025. The choice of a comprehensive methodology was dictated by the need to investigate conflicts in a multidimensional context – historical, political, ethnic, security, and institutional. The methodological foundation rested on the principles of systems analysis, comparative political science, and regional studies. Within the framework of historical-political analysis, a comparative-historical method was applied to reconstruct the evolution of the Kyrgyz Republic’s state border, beginning with the Soviet period and culminating in the signing of the agreements with Uzbekistan – Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. LRU-804 (2022) and the agreement with Tajikistan (Eurasian Research Institute, n.d.b). For the analysis of conflict dynamics, the chronological method was used with subsequent classification of armed incidents according to parties involved, types of escalation, forms of actor engagement, and consequences. The case study method was applied to examine in depth specific border villages that became epicentres or focal points of border conflicts. The choice of Maksat and Ak-Sai villages was determined by their strategic location in the zone of greatest tension, as well as the fact that these

settlements repeatedly became arenas of clashes over access to water resources, land, and security issues. The use of case studies made it possible to reveal in detail the social, economic, security, and cultural consequences of conflicts at the level of local communities, which is fundamentally important for understanding the broader regional dynamics.

To assess the political context of border incidents, discourse analysis was employed on public statements by Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek officials, as well as on documents of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (n.d.) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (n.d.). Particular attention was paid to the analysis of rhetoric at security summits and to the interpretation of conflicts in statements by regional organisations (Eurasian Research Institute, n.d.b; Ambrosio, 2024). This enabled the identification of differences in the framing of causes and formats of resolution. To systematise the presentation, summary tables were compiled to structure information on the chronology of conflicts, forms of escalation, number of casualties, involvement of state structures, and reactions of international organisations. The tables were based on reports from authoritative media outlets and data from international analytical centres (The President ratified..., 2017; Kyrgyz-Tajik Conflict..., 2021; Kyrgyzstan: Free the 22..., 2023). Within the research methodology, attention was given not only to analysing the causes and dynamics of border conflicts but also to developing practical recommendations for preventing their escalation. In particular, the results of empirical observations and source analysis were used to formulate preventive strategies aimed at institutionalising local mechanisms of reconciliation and improving the effectiveness of state security policy. The principles of source validity, data representativeness, and compliance with defined criteria of comparative analysis were observed. Special attention was devoted to issues of statelessness, territorial identity, the conflict potential of enclaves, and water-land demarcation in the Ferghana Valley.

Results

Causes and preconditions of armed conflicts in the border regions of Central Asia (1990s-2020s)

Following the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, Central Asia faced the challenge of rethinking administrative boundaries which, in the Soviet period, had been largely nominal and failed to take account of either the ethnic composition of the population or historically formed territorial perceptions. The emergence of new sovereign states – notably the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan – was accompanied by processes of nation-state building, within which the task of defining the state border arose. This issue had both technical and political dimensions, since the borders created by the national-territorial delimitation of the

1920s-1930s largely ignored the ethnocultural mosaic of the region (Laruelle, 2021). In the case of the Kyrgyz Republic, the situation proved particularly complex in the south – in the Ferghana Valley – where the state border with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan often passes through densely populated areas with a mixed ethnic composition (Bekmirzaev, 2024). In Soviet times this did not create significant problems, since administrative borders did not bear the attributes of sovereignty. However, after the proclamation of independence, the former nominal boundaries turned into instruments of national identity and state territoriality. In this context, the Soviet policy of “ethicising territory” and creating “national republics” within a multi-ethnic region gave rise to protracted inter-ethnic disputes, which only intensified under conditions of state sovereignty.

The legacy of the colonial policies of the Russian Empire and, subsequently, of Soviet administration consisted in the systematic redrawing of territories for the sake of political balance and administrative control, rather than in accordance with ethnographic or historical factors. As a result, some republics came to contain enclaves with a predominantly different ethnic population (for example, the Vorukh and Sokh enclaves), and in many border villages ethnic Kyrgyz, Uzbeks or Tajiks live in mixed communities or constitute a minority within a “foreign” state (Kalra & Saxena, 2021). This configuration became a source of numerous conflicts, as issues of administrative subordination, access to resources or even the very right of certain settlements to exist became the subject of acute interstate dispute. The ethnopolitical factors behind conflicts on the post-Soviet borders of Central Asia are extraordinarily complex due to the intertwining of identities, historical grievances and lived social practices. Border areas of the Kyrgyz Republic, particularly Batken Region, are characterised by a high level of ethnic intermixing. In many villages, Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Uzbeks live side by side, maintaining their own languages, religious practices, traditions and social structures. In the post-Soviet period this ethnic diversity, once seen as a resource, began to function as a marker of difference and a factor of division.

In the 1990s, during the transitional period after the collapse of the USSR, the problem of citizenship in the post-Soviet space, including in Central Asia, acquired critical importance, especially in border regions where ethnic, linguistic and religious heterogeneity did not correspond to the new political borders. In the Kyrgyz Republic, this problem was particularly acute in Batken and Leilek districts, home to numerous Tajik and Uzbek communities. At the moment of independence, many residents of border villages held only Soviet passports, which under the new circumstances lost their legal status. Given the lack of an effective registration system, the region’s complex geography and uncoordinated procedures for acquiring citizenship, a number of people effectively remained in a state of

statelessness – persons without citizenship who lacked access to basic social services and legal protection. A significant problem was also the inconsistency between people's actual place of residence and their official administrative affiliation. Thus, in a number of settlements on the border with Tajikistan – for example, the villages of Kan, Borborduk, Somonien or Tort-Kocho – a significant proportion of residents who identified themselves as citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic were officially registered as living on Tajik territory. This gave rise to numerous legal collisions: a person might be eligible to take part in elections in the Kyrgyz Republic, yet be denied access to Kyrgyz healthcare or to school education for their children due to the absence of an internal passport or registration (Kurmanalieva, 2018).

Another concrete consequence of this problem was limited access to the education system. In villages where the majority population consisted of Tajiks or Uzbeks, state schools often did not provide instruction in the mother tongue, and textbooks in Tajik failed to arrive due to the absence of intergovernmental agreements on cultural and educational cooperation. As a result, children from ethnic minorities were forced either to study in Kyrgyz, without possessing an adequate command of the language, or to travel to neighbouring countries for their schooling, which only deepened alienation and sustained a transnational identity. In the long term this led to a situation in which state policy on the formation of national identity remained unbalanced and reactive. On the one hand, it proclaimed the equality of citizens before the law regardless of ethnic affiliation; on the other, it did not provide the institutional basis to realise this equality. The legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic contains no provisions recognising or protecting the cultural-territorial autonomy of minorities in border zones. Nor are there quotas for political representation or parity-based administrative governance in areas with predominantly Tajik or Uzbek populations. For example, in the village of Ak-Sai, where Tajiks make up as much as 70% of the population (Minaeva & Melnikova, 2012), all senior administrative posts are held by Kyrgyz, which engenders distrust towards the local authorities and makes it impossible to resolve conflicts at an early stage.

Competition between local and national interests further complicates the situation. On the one hand, the central authorities seek to avoid escalation and support interstate dialogue; on the other, local communities and their leaders, under pressure from public opinion, demand decisive action, including the mobilisation of security forces. In many cases it is the actions or inaction of local authorities that become the catalysts for conflict: for instance, inadequate responses to the unauthorised construction of water-intake facilities or roads crossing disputed territories provoke outrage in neighbouring communities and trigger escalation. The outcome of such multi-level dysfunction is chronic

instability in border areas, where each new season of agricultural activity is accompanied by the risk of armed clashes. The absence of a coherent state policy for conflict resolution, the lack of coordination between different levels of government, and the weak legal regulation of community boundaries and land use create a situation of uncertainty in which any local incident can grow into a large-scale crisis with international ramifications (Hastings & Ubilava, 2025).

The foreign policy context of border conflicts in Central Asia is a key factor in shaping both strategic approaches to settlement and the exacerbation of situations that have local origins but rapidly acquire an interstate dimension. In the post-Soviet period, Central Asia became an arena where the interests of several global and regional powers intersect, notably the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, Turkey, as well as the United States and the European Union. Although none of these powers is a direct participant in the border conflicts, their influence is evident in shaping the region's security architecture, encouraging sovereignty policies, and supporting particular regimes or settlement models. The Russian Federation traditionally acts as a security guarantor for Central Asian countries through its institutional presence within the CSTO (n.d.), as well as through bilateral military agreements (Ambrosio, 2024). However, in the case of interstate clashes between CSTO member states – for example, between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Tajikistan – Russia maintains neutrality or confines itself to calls for dialogue, without direct intervention. This creates a paradoxical situation in which a security structure intended to guarantee stability effectively stands aside in conflict situations requiring urgent arbitration. In this context, the role of the CSTO as an effective crisis-response instrument raises serious academic and political doubts.

The People's Republic of China, interested in regional stability due to the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative and its growing economic presence, adheres to a so-called "pragmatic neutrality" (Hoo & McKinney, 2022). China does not participate in the settlement of border conflicts between the states of Central Asia but actively supports the development of multilateral security mechanisms such as the SCO (n.d.). Yet the SCO's potential in resolving border conflicts among its members also remains limited, as the organisation lacks coercive or arbitral mechanisms. The SCO focuses primarily on preventing terrorism, extremism and separatism, and does not include within its remit the settlement of territorial disputes or the protection of community rights in border areas. The United States and the European Union pursue policies in Central Asia that support regional stability through economic assistance, development projects and political backing for democratic reforms. However, their influence in the sphere of border security is indirect and insufficiently

active to affect the real course of conflicts. Moreover, given the geopolitical sensitivity of the region, the US and EU avoid direct involvement in conflicts so as not to complicate relations with Russia or China, which regard Central Asia as a zone of traditional influence.

Particular attention should be paid to specific interstate agreements that the Kyrgyz Republic has concluded with its neighbours within the framework of the delimitation and demarcation of the state border. Substantial progress was achieved in relations with the Republic of Uzbekistan. A major milestone was the signing of the Agreement between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Uzbekistan on the delimitation of certain sections of the state border on 5 October 2017 during President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's visit to Bishkek (The President ratified..., 2017). The agreement made it possible to settle around 85% of the total length of the common border (1,314 km), including contentious sections in the Ala-Buka District of Jalal-Abad Region and several disputed canals and water intakes. In November 2022 the Jogorku Kenesh (parliament) of the Kyrgyz Republic also ratified the Agreement on certain border sections (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. LRU-804, 2022), including the transfer of the "Kempir-Abad" reservoir to the Uzbek side in exchange for the definition of several important tracts of land of strategic importance for the agricultural needs of Kyrgyz communities. Despite public protests, including the detention of more than 20 public figures and MPs, the agreement was implemented, effectively completing the delimitation process with Uzbekistan (Kyrgyzstan: Free the 22..., 2023).

By contrast, the situation with the Republic of Tajikistan remains complex and unstable. Nevertheless, as of 2025, significant progress had been achieved between the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan in border demarcation, culminating in the signing of a historic state border agreement on 13 March (Eurasian Research Institute, n.d.b). These arrangements, which included land swaps and shared access to water resources, substantially reduced tensions in the region and helped promote stability in the Ferghana Valley by improving economic and social ties between the countries. The most conflict-prone areas were those around the Tajik enclave of Vorukh and the village of Kok-Tash in Batken Region. Uncertainty over the legal status of these territories led to frequent clashes – for example, the incident of 28-30 April 2021, when a dispute over control of the "Golovnoy" water-distribution point escalated into hostilities with the use of small arms, mortars and armoured vehicles (Kyrgyz-Tajik Conflict..., 2021). On the Kyrgyz side at least 55 people were killed, more than 200 were wounded, and over 30,000 people were evacuated from border villages. Despite the signing of a ceasefire protocol on 1 May 2021, no stable political-legal settlement was reached, and by September 2022 the conflict had recurred with greater

intensity, resulting in 63 deaths on the Kyrgyz side (Saud & Gul, 2023). The bilateral interdepartmental commission on border delimitation and demarcation works irregularly, and its decisions are often rejected by the local population, which believes the process proceeds without regard to historical, ethnic and socio-economic realities. In particular, residents of the border village of Maksat have repeatedly blocked the passage of Tajik vehicles for fear of losing control over lands the community considers "historically Kyrgyz".

In this context, the role of regional security structures proves extremely limited. Formally, these structures proclaim their commitment to ensuring regional stability; in practice, however, when interstate conflicts arise between member states, they remain passive observers. During the Batken events of 2021 the CSTO confined itself to a statement of concern and a call for de-escalation (MacHaffie, 2024). No peacekeeping mechanisms were deployed, prompting criticism from Kyrgyz politicians and civil society. A similar situation occurred in 2022 – despite the scale of hostilities, which included the use of artillery and unmanned aerial vehicles, the organisations took no crisis-response measures. The SCO, despite an expanded security agenda, focuses primarily on preventing terrorism, separatism and extremism rather than on settling interstate disputes. Although it serves as a platform for political dialogue, real instruments of arbitration or crisis intervention are lacking. For example, following the Eurasian Research Institute (n.d.a) summit in 2022, neither side received support in resolving the border crisis, despite the Kyrgyz Republic's explicit appeals for international monitoring of the situation (Talant, 2023). In such a context, none of the parties to the conflict has clear incentives to involve regional structures as mediators or arbiters. There are fears that third-party participation may lead to a delegitimisation of sovereignty, open up domestic political debates or increase pressure from stronger partners. This explains the tendency to resolve conflicts through local methods: by creating informal self-defence groups, convening popular assemblies, blocking roads and, in some cases, even resorting to spontaneous evacuation of the population or armed confrontation without prior notification of state authorities. Overall, the foreign policy dimension of border conflicts in Central Asia cannot be considered in isolation from internal processes. The influence of third countries and international organisations is important but not decisive in conflict settlement. Without consistent and systematic policies by the countries of the region themselves, including the Kyrgyz Republic, the effectiveness of international mechanisms will remain low.

Dynamics of border conflicts and historical lessons for the Kyrgyz Republic

In the post-Soviet period, the Kyrgyz Republic has been a participant in a number of armed and border

conflicts, a significant portion of which took place along the state's southern and south-western borders. Their character is marked both by high intensity in certain periods and by chronic recurrence, indicating the incompleteness of delimitation processes, ethno-territorial fragmentation and the unresolved structural causes of conflict in the region. Particular attention should be paid to two key clusters of conflict episodes: first, the

Batken events of 1999-2000, which were predominantly transnational and militarised in nature; and second, the series of border incidents with the Republic of Tajikistan in the 2010s-2020s, which manifested unresolved interstate contradictions in the spheres of security, resource allocation and ethnic interaction. Table 1 presents a structured overview of key conflict events involving the Kyrgyz Republic.

Table 1. Key conflicts involving the Kyrgyz Republic (1999-2022)

Date/ Period	Parties to the conflict	Principal causes	Form of escalation	Consequences
August- October 1999	Kyrgyz Republic – Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)	Incursion of Islamist militants into Kyrgyz Republic territory; weak border control	Armed clashes with regular army	Strengthening of military presence in the region; international attention to border vulnerability; shadow co-operation with Uzbekistan
August- September 2000	Kyrgyz Republic – IMU	Renewed militant incursions; incomplete clearance operations after 1999	Guerrilla warfare, special forces operations	Formalisation of a military strategy in Batken; increase in international assistance (including from the US)
May 2014	Kyrgyz Republic – Republic of Tajikistan	Disputed territories in Leilek District; issues of access to water and roads	Armed clash between border guards	Temporary suspension of delimitation talks; heightened tensions between communities
January 2015	Kyrgyz Republic – Republic of Tajikistan	Dispute over water intake; unresolved rights to resource use	Exchanges of fire, evacuation of civilians	Temporary closure of border checkpoints; activation of intergovernmental commissions, but without real agreements
September 2019	Kyrgyz Republic – Republic of Tajikistan	Incomplete demarcation; everyday disputes with political overtones	Mass clashes, arson attacks on buildings	Deployment of special units; evacuation of population; rising mutual accusations at state level
April 2021	Kyrgyz Republic – Republic of Tajikistan	Control over the "Golovnoy" water-distribution point in Kok-Tash; land disputes	Intense fighting with armoured vehicles	The largest conflict since independence; truce achieved under Russian pressure; growth of anti-Tajik sentiment in the media and society
September 2022	Kyrgyz Republic – Republic of Tajikistan	Escalation of the previous conflict; mutual distrust of peace initiatives	Hours-long battles, use of artillery	Breakdown of negotiations; political radicalisation of border-region populations; decline in cross-border co-operation

Source: compiled by the author based on R. Azizian (2006), Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict: Solving water puzzle key to preventing fresh fighting (2021), A. Peter (2022), A. Saud & A. Gul (2023)

The chronological structure of conflicts involving the Kyrgyz Republic shows a shift in the nature of threats: from transnational terrorism (1999-2000) to interstate border conflict with the Republic of Tajikistan (2010s-2020s). At the early stage (the Batken events), the Kyrgyz Republic faced an external threat in the form of organised armed Islamism, which exploited border vulnerabilities and complex geography to

infiltrate and conduct guerrilla activities. The response was the strengthening of national security, the militarisation of the southern regions, and the engagement of external partners. Since the early 2010s, conflicts have been predominantly local yet interstate in character. They are linked to unresolved territorial issues, competition over water resources, and disputes around traditional land use. Conflicts are often initiated or escalated

by specific actions on the ground – the construction of infrastructure, access to water-intake facilities, or aggressive behaviour by local residents – indicating a high decentralisation of risks. Changes in conflict intensity in 2021-2022 point to a dangerous trend towards a shift from short-term incidents to full-scale armed clashes involving heavy weaponry, significant casualties, and the mass evacuation of civilians. For example, the village of Maksat in Batken Region suffered serious consequences when armed clashes damaged residential buildings and infrastructure, triggering a wave of temporary out-migration. Ak-Sai, located near the “Golovnoy” water-distribution point, has proved to be one of the most conflict-prone villages due to competition over water resources. During periods of escalation, the community experienced irrigation disruptions that affected yields and undermined the economic stability of local farmers (Murzakulova, 2017). This indicates a deepening of structural confrontation between the states which cannot be resolved through local negotiations alone. The politicisation of the conflict is increasing, reflected in the rise of inter-ethnic hostility, the breakdown of cross-border economic ties, and the discrediting of diplomatic channels.

In the context of frequent border incidents, escalations of violence, and uncertainty regarding territorial demarcation, the domestic political response to these events became a decisive factor both in mobilising state institutions and in consolidating public opinion around the concept of the state border. In this context, national boundaries ceased to be an abstract administrative

category and turned into a symbol of national sovereignty, security, and historical justice. The strengthening of the notion of the state border in public consciousness occurred not only under the influence of official policy but also through the active involvement of the media in shaping the national discourse. In situations of border flare-ups, Kyrgyz mass media (both state and private) broadcast predominantly patriotic, mobilising narratives that emphasised the sacrifices of the local population, the heroism of servicemen, and appealed to the Kyrgyz Republic’s historical rights to disputed territories. This one-sided approach contributed to a rapid rise in national solidarity, but at the same time sharpened inter-ethnic rhetoric, hindered dialogue with other ethnic communities, and at times even militarised public sentiment. Public opinion, under conditions of conflict, functioned as a mobilising mechanism exerting pressure on the central authorities. Expectations of a resolute state response to border threats formed a kind of “ethos of defence”, according to which concessions in negotiations could be seen as weakness or a betrayal of national interests. This complicated the political leadership’s room for manoeuvre in diplomacy, limited opportunities for compromise during negotiations, and led to hard-line public statements that were not always helpful in talks with the other side (Wang, 2024). Against the backdrop of rising tension in border areas, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic intensified processes of delimitation and demarcation of the state border (Polat, 2021). The status of the delimitation and demarcation of the state border of the Kyrgyz Republic is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Status of the delimitation and demarcation of the state border of the Kyrgyz Republic (data as of 2025)

Neighbouring state	Border length	Settled (km)	Unsettled (km)	Character of relations in the demarcation process	Key agreements/issues
Republic of Kazakhstan	1,212 km	100%	0 km	Full agreement, good-neighbourly relations	2001 agreement; demarcation completed in 2008; no recorded conflicts
Republic of Uzbekistan	1,314 km	~1,250 km	~64 km	High level of political will to settle; tensions greatly reduced after 2017	Agreements signed in 2017, 2018 and 2021; Gavasay section settled; technical disagreements remain
Republic of Tajikistan	972 km	~580 km	~392 km	Tension, periodic armed clashes; lack of transparency in talks; politicisation of the process	After the 2021-2022 clashes talks were intensified; in 2025 an agreement was signed
People's Republic of China	1,063 km	100%	0 km	Full settlement; strategic partnership; control over border security	1999 agreement, reaffirmed in 2002; no recorded territorial claims

Source: compiled by the author based on Eurasian Research Institute (n.d.b), B. Toktogulov (2018), P. Reid (2023), A. Balas (2024)

The data presented show that the success of the demarcation process depends directly on political interaction, the historical background of bilateral relations, the level of trust between states, and the dynamics of the domestic political situation. With the Republic of

Kazakhstan and the People’s Republic of China, the issue was settled thanks to stable relations and political continuity. With Uzbekistan, significant progress was achieved due to changes in the political leadership in Tashkent and an orientation towards regional

integration. By contrast, the example of the Republic of Tajikistan points to a deep crisis of trust, the periodic degradation of the negotiating process, and a lack of political flexibility. Demarcation here is hampered not only by technical aspects but also by deep divergences in national narratives, conflicting interpretations of Soviet maps, and the influence of local interests on decision-making processes. Delays in resolving border disputes with Tajikistan lead to recurrent conflicts, civilian casualties, mass displacement, and long-term consequences for regional co-operation.

Under such conditions, local-level reconciliation mechanisms acquire particular importance. Their effectiveness depends on the ability of local actors – opinion leaders, elders, representatives of religious communities, schoolteachers, and local entrepreneurs – to build inter-community dialogue without direct intervention from the central authorities, who lack sufficient legitimacy or precise understanding of the local context. In a number of villages in Batken Region, instances have been recorded of the creation of local reconciliation councils, grassroots security initiatives, and peace councils with equal participation of representatives of all ethnic communities (Jasutis *et al.*, 2023). Despite limited resources, such institutions have proved capable not only of preventing conflicts but also of ensuring rapid response mechanisms – for example, by mobilising joint patrols or organising collective responses to provocations. The experience of these initiatives shows that, at the local level, a key lesson is the need to create sustainable platforms for dialogue that function continuously, not only in times of crisis. Practical recommendations include: institutionalising reconciliation councils as officially recognised advisory bodies; providing them with basic funding; training mediators from among teachers or community leaders; and conducting regular training in non-violent conflict resolution. This would increase trust between communities and establish an early-warning system for escalations.

However, while local mechanisms are important, they cannot be effective without state support to provide institutional resilience and to implement a comprehensive national security strategy. The first and most obvious step in this direction was the strengthening of border control. After the 2021 conflict, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic decided to increase the size of the border service, modernise technical equipment, and create new military fortifications and observation points in border villages (Shahid *et al.*, 2023). In addition, infrastructural reinforcement of the borders began through the construction of dual-use roads, which not only allow rapid responses to incidents but also improve the region's economic integration. At the same time, a key lesson from this stage was the recognition that a purely force-based approach does not guarantee lasting stability. One practical solution, therefore, is the creation of joint interstate patrols and crisis

co-ordination centres that combine security and civilian resources to respond to border incidents. Nevertheless, an exclusively militarised approach proves insufficient for stabilising border regions. There is a need to transition to a comprehensive approach to the development of border territories that encompasses infrastructural, social, economic, humanitarian and environmental components. As of 2023, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic had approved a number of programmes for the socio-economic development of Batken Region, including the construction of schools, hospitals and logistics centres, and support schemes for small and medium-sized businesses (Musaeva, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these programmes is limited by logistical complexity, a lack of institutional co-ordination between central and local authorities, and public mistrust formed under conditions of many years of instability. This experience shows that such programmes must be accompanied by systematic trust-building measures – for example, involving communities in project planning, open budgeting, and regular reporting to the public. A practical lesson is also the need to combine economic development with social integration: creating inter-ethnic co-operatives, supporting joint educational and cultural initiatives, and investing in youth programmes to reduce the risk of radicalisation.

Accordingly, the key challenge to the national security of the Kyrgyz Republic remains the institutional strengthening of the state in matters of territorial integrity. This concerns not only the formal establishment of the state border through demarcation and delimitation, but also the creation of a functional system for governing border areas as full-fledged subjects of development. This implies a shift from a reactive security model to a preventive one, including risk analysis, the political integration of ethnic minorities, expanded opportunities for community participation in decision-making, and the consistent implementation of crisis-management strategies based on scenario planning. A recommendation here is to introduce mandatory mechanisms for monitoring border incidents, to create risk databases for state and local authorities, and to involve international intermediaries in the development of long-term security programmes. In this way, it is possible not only to minimise the risks of new armed escalations but also gradually to transform border territories from zones of conflict into spaces of co-operation.

Discussion

A synthesis of the research results has made it possible to identify a wide range of factors underlying armed conflicts in the border regions of Central Asia in the 1990s-2020s. These included not only disputes over borders but also deeper ethnopolitical, institutional and historical preconditions linked to Soviet practices of territorial administration, the transformation of statehood after 1991, and new security challenges in

the post-Soviet period. The study corroborates the conclusions of S. Karimova & M. Abdullaeva (2024) regarding the complex nature of border conflicts in Central Asia, whose roots lie in the Soviet era, particularly in administrative delimitation carried out without regard for the region's ethnocultural mosaic. While S. Karimova & M. Abdullaeva emphasised a shared historical foundation and the potential for regional rapprochement, the present study found that in practice this very shared legacy often served as a source of conflict, especially in areas with intricate ethnic structures such as the Fergana Valley. Despite similarities in focus, the recommendations in S. Karimova & M. Abdullaeva concerning the formation of regional identity and effective resource management did not find confirmation in this study's empirical material, which demonstrated the low effectiveness of both bilateral and multilateral co-operation mechanisms under conditions of competition for land, water and administrative control. Issues of citizenship, statelessness and local under-representation – omitted in that work – were, by contrast, central to the conflict mechanisms identified in the border territories of the Kyrgyz Republic.

In the study by M.E. Erendor & E. Çitak (2025), attention was focused on the security dimension of regional interaction and on the role of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) in resolving border conflicts. The authors treated the events in Batken Region in 1999 as a key marker of heightened inter-ethnic tension that influenced subsequent security policy in the region. The present research confirms the importance of the Batken events for understanding conflict dynamics, but finds no evidence of a systematic OTS impact on the real resolution of interstate disputes. In the context of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflicts of 2021-2022, the organisation's involvement was recorded as minimal, despite its stated goal of strengthening regional security. Contrary to the optimistic assumptions of M.E. Erendor & E. Çitak, this study shows that without the active participation of the parties in settling their border disputes, even potentially influential regional organisations remain marginal players in conflict prevention. V. Artman & A.C. Diener (2021) conceptualised Central Asia as a space of constant transformation, where borders perform not only a geopolitical but also a socio-symbolic function. This approach allows border lines to be viewed not merely as material boundaries but as outcomes of multi-level negotiations over power, belonging and subjectivity. The findings herein confirm this multidimensionality while detailing it in applied terms: in particular, it was established that institutional inequality – especially the under-representation of ethnic minorities in local government – helped turn symbolic barriers into sources of real conflict. Whereas V. Artman & A.C. Diener foregrounded macro-level transformations, the empirical examination of border incidents, civic protests and the dynamics of local

self-government in this study revealed concrete social mechanisms of marginalisation that fuelled escalation. This was especially true of villages located on disputed sections of the border, where residents simultaneously faced legal uncertainty, limited access to public services and the persistent threat of armed incidents.

The work of Ö.F. Kocatepe & M. Şahin (2024), centred on the theory of regional security complexes, showed that Central Asia has not achieved self-sufficiency as a security subregion – consistent with this study's conclusions about the limited potential of regional institutions. Particularly important was the observation that political security remained fragmented due to competition between intra-regional interests and external influence. This aligns with findings on the inability of regional states to act in concert in the context of border delimitation and the lack of political will to compromise in bilateral negotiations. The study by S. Rindlisbacher & A. Thomas (2023) provides deep historical grounding for national-territorial delimitation, which laid the foundations for protracted ethno-political conflicts. This coincides with conclusion that the Soviet model of territorial organisation – based on divisions between sedentary and nomadic peoples – ignored the interests of mixed communities and created the basis for contemporary spatial fragmentation. The identified mismatch between demographic reality and administrative subordination – as in the case of Ak-Sai – supports the critique of Soviet border-making advanced by S. Rindlisbacher & A. Thomas.

The findings of S. Olimova & M. Olimov (2022) on de-bordering and re-bordering in the Isfara Valley help to interpret the paradoxical processes of simultaneous conflictual and integrative interaction. These results accord with conclusions regarding the ambivalent role of cross-border networks, which on the one hand may reduce tensions through interdependence, yet on the other do not prevent outbreaks of violence because the institutional environment remains weak. Particularly relevant is the idea of the dual nature of life at the border, where markets, cultural ties and kinship networks foster interaction, while political decisions create new barriers and lines of division. The research by K. Ash (2022) identified a direct link between the weakness of state institutions and the escalation of inter-ethnic violence. Using the 2010 events in Osh as an example, it showed how the breakdown of central authority opened space for informal ethnic actors and mobilisation grounded in fear, identity and mistrust. This conclusion is consistent with the analysis of armed clashes in the border areas of the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, where low trust in official structures, the absence of legitimate participatory mechanisms, and susceptibility to nationalist discourse contributed to local escalation. As in K. Ash's study, it was noted that during peak phases of tension the state proved unable to ensure security or guarantee compliance with agreements, resulting in surges of violence.

A. Cooley (2021) emphasised the predominance of external interpretations over local approaches in analyses of Central Asia, noting that most international studies remained focused on geopolitical vectors, avoiding deeper analysis of local conflicts and intra-regional dynamics. This observation partly explains the limited understanding of the specificities of border conflicts in global analytical frameworks. This study confirms this thesis: the examination of inter-ethnic interaction, citizenship issues, water resources, seasonal migration and local memory proved far more productive in explaining the real nature of conflicts than abstract security models. Local knowledge and social practices therefore require greater analytical recognition. S. Mayer (2024) demonstrated the structural dependence of Central Asian states' security policies on external actors, primarily Russia, while noting cautious tendencies towards distancing from Moscow after 2022, including the revival of regional formats of co-operation without Russia's participation. According to the conclusions reached, the effectiveness of multilateral structures – particularly the CSTO – was low, and there was an absence of robust regional mechanisms to contain conflicts. Despite certain successes in agreeing borders with Uzbekistan, deep contradictions with Tajikistan remained unresolved, indicating the unfinished nature of collective regional security. Competing national interests and weak inter-state co-ordination continued to impede the development of a resilient security architecture.

M. Reeves (2021), drawing on careful analysis of archival materials and ethnographic observations in the Ferghana Valley, treated Soviet national-territorial delimitation as an incomplete, protracted process that did not end in the 1920s but continued in various forms throughout the twentieth century. The study focused on legal and administrative problems associated with frequent changes in land subordination between Soviet republics, especially in connection with infrastructural projects and agricultural expansion. In this context, post-Soviet border conflicts were interpreted as a logical continuation of Soviet practices that never acquired final form or stability. This view resonates with findings on the unfinished processes of delimitation and demarcation, particularly between the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan. However, the analysis conducted as part of this study placed greater emphasis on the political instrumentalisation of "indeterminate" borders by state and non-state actors after 1991, and on the role of local communities as active subjects of conflict – elements less visible in M. Reeves' work. Furthermore, in this study, the authors found that the Soviet legacy not only created legal preconditions for disputes but also shaped specific ethnopolitical structures that fuelled tensions in the absence of autonomy or representation at the local level. M. Reeves paid less attention to these aspects, focusing primarily on the administrative history of delimitation rather than on

social identities or the political impact of conflicts on contemporary state institutions.

In the study by C.J. Sullivan (2021), the 2021 conflict between the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan was highlighted as the bloodiest of all border clashes in Central Asia, with its strategic significance underscored in the context of both states' CSTO membership. Special attention was paid to the contemporary political climate, in which interstate disputes combined with domestic socio-economic problems, complicating settlement processes. The focus on the Russian Federation as the dominant external player – one which, despite hegemonic aspirations, did not demonstrate an ability to intervene effectively – accords with findings that the CSTO and other regional structures had limited impact, and that geopolitical inertia allowed armed clashes to erupt even between formal allies. This study further showed that conflicts not only lacked effective arbitration but were often used as instruments of domestic mobilisation, with nationalist narratives bolstering support for those in power. Whereas C.J. Sullivan privileges the geopolitical perspective over the local dimension, this study concentrates on the multi-level nature of conflicts – from the actions of local councils to interstate competition and external diplomacy – and points to the need to strengthen local reconciliation mechanisms, including the institutional support of civic initiatives.

Comparisons with prior research thus confirm the multidimensionality of border conflicts in Central Asia, which cannot be reduced either to remnants of Soviet administrative practice or to external geopolitical competition alone. Local factors – including ethnocultural structures, informal governance practices, problems of representation and access to resources – were decisive in the escalation of violence. A historical perspective helps to understand the origins of conflicts but does not explain their current intensity, which is also conditioned by a crisis of trust in state institutions and the absence of effective multi-level settlement mechanisms. External actors and regional organisations, though claiming the role of guarantors of stability, have not succeeded in developing an effective model of peaceful coexistence in the region. Hence, conflict resolution requires not only the legal formalisation of borders but also a rethinking of approaches to inclusive governance, social integration and the development of local forms of trust and co-operation.

Conclusions

The study of the causes and preconditions of armed conflicts in the border regions of Central Asia in the 1990s-2020s reveals their complex character, determined by historical, ethnopolitical and institutional factors. The Soviet practice of national-territorial delimitation in the 1920s-1930s, which ignored the region's ethnocultural mosaic, laid the groundwork for territorial disputes after the collapse of the USSR. These

problems were most acute in the Ferghana Valley, where the borders of the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan cut through densely populated areas with mixed ethnic composition. This gave rise to disputes over administrative subordination, access to resources and the determination of the legal status of settlements. Ethnopolitical factors were exacerbated by the interweaving of identities, historical grievances and social practices, as seen in Batken Region, where Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek communities coexisted. In the 1990s, following the dissolution of the USSR, a significant number of residents of border villages in Batken Region remained without citizenship; the absence of clear administrative affiliation and slow registration procedures led to the emergence of stateless persons deprived of access to social services (education, healthcare, land rights). The lack of mechanisms for cultural-territorial autonomy for ethnic minorities – such as Tajiks in Ak-Sai – undermined trust in state institutions and complicated early-stage settlement. The research also showed that the absence of transparent procedures for border delimitation and demarcation contributed to the recurrence of conflicts and the reproduction of crisis scenarios in the region. At the same time, the growing role of civic initiatives in reconciliation processes indicates the need to combine state and local security strategies.

The external dimension of conflicts was marked by intersecting interests of Russia, China, the USA and the EU, although their direct influence on crisis resolution remained limited. Regional organisations (the CSTO, the SCO) demonstrated low effectiveness, particularly during the escalation of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict in 2021-2022. By contrast, local reconciliation councils that included representatives of different ethnic groups showed a degree of effectiveness-restoring interpersonal dialogue, organising temporary ceasefires and agreeing on resource use at the local level. Despite measures by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic to strengthen border infrastructure and develop peripheral regions, their impact was constrained by poor co-ordination and low public trust. Future research should focus on analysing local reconciliation mechanisms and developing comprehensive strategies for stabilising border regions that take into account the interests of all ethnic groups.

Acknowledgements

None.

Funding

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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1990–2020–жылдардагы Борбордук Азиянын чек арасындагы аскердик чыр-чатактар: себептери, динамикасы жана тарыхый сабактары

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Анотация. 1990-2020-жылдардагы Борбордук Азиядагы чек ара чыр-чатактары постсоветтик мейкиндиктеги аймактык туруктуулук үчүн негизги коркунучтардын бири болгон. Бул изилдөөнүн максаты геосаясий чөйрөдөгү трансформациялардын контекстинде Борбордук Азия мамлекеттеринин, атап айтканда, Кыргыз Республикасынын ортосундагы куралдуу чек ара инциденттеринин себептерин, жүрүшүн жана кесепеттерин көп өлчөмдүү талдоо болгон. Изилдөөнүн методологиясы тарыхый-саясий, хронологиялык, дискурстук талдоо жана кейс изилдөө ыкмаларынын айкалышында негизделген. Изилдөөлөр чек ара чыр-чатактары улуттук-аймактык делимитациянын советтик мурасы, иденттүүлүктөрдүн этносаясий чырмалуусу, ресурстардын бирдей эмес жеткиликтүүлүгү жана мамлекеттик структуралардын институционалдык алсыздыгы менен калыптанган татаал мүнөзгө ээ экендигин аныктады. Фергана өрөөнү, өзгөчө Кыргыз Республикасынын Баткен облусу чыр-чатактардын өзгөчө курч очогу болуп калды. Изилдөө жергиликтүү жана улуттук кызыкчылыктардын ортосундагы атаандаштык сезондук тутануу учурунда күчөшүнө өбөлгө түзөрүн көрсөттү. Эл аралык уюмдардын конфликттин деэскалациясына тийгизген таасири катышуучулардын ортосундагы карама-каршылыктардан жана ишенимдин төмөндүгүнөн улам чектелген. Айрыкча кыргыз-тажик чек арасында делимитация жана демаркация процесстери аягына чыга элек. Ошол эле учурда, жергиликтүү элдештирүү практикасы мамлекеттик институттардын колдоосун талап кылса да, белгилүү бир потенциалды көрсөтөт. Корутундулар чек ара чыр-чатактары аймактагы кеңири саясий жана социалдык кайра жаралуулардын индикатору катары кызмат кылып, талдоо жүргүзүүгө комплекстүү дисциплиналар аралык мамилени талап кылаарын баса белгилейт. Тарыхый тажрыйба жана аймактагы бардык этностордун кызыкчылыктары эске алынганда гана эффективдүү турукташтыруу мүмкүн. Изилдөөнүн практикалык мааниси чек ара чыр-чатактарынын күчөшүнө жол бербөө жана аймактык коопсуздуктун туруктуу механизмдерин түзүү боюнча сунуштарды иштеп чыгууда.

Ключові слова: жарандыгы жок адамдар; куралдуу кагылышуулар; делимитация; демаркация; эскалациялоо; кризистик жооп

Военные конфликты на границах Центральной Азии в 1990–2020-х годах: причины, динамика и исторические уроки

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Анотація. Приграничные конфликты в Центральной Азии на протяжении 1990-2020 годов представляли собой одну из ключевых угроз региональной стабильности на постсоветском пространстве. Целью данного исследования был многомерный анализ причин, хода и последствий вооружённых пограничных инцидентов между государствами Центральной Азии, в частности, с Кыргызстаном, в контексте трансформации геополитической обстановки. Методология исследования основывалась на сочетании историко-политического, хронологического, дискурсивного и кейс-стади подходов. Результаты исследования показали, что приграничные конфликты имеют сложную природу, сформированную советским наследием национально-территориального размежевания, этнополитическим переплетением идентичностей, неравным доступом к ресурсам и институциональной слабостью государственных структур. Ферганская долина, и, в частности, Баткенская область Кыргызстана, стала особенно острым очагом проявления конфликтов. Исследование показало, что конкуренция местных и общенациональных интересов способствовала эскалации во время сезонных обострений. Влияние международных организаций на деэскалацию конфликта оказалось ограниченным из-за противоречий между участниками и низкого уровня доверия. Процессы делимитации и демаркации остаются незавершёнными, особенно вдоль кыргызско-таджикской границы. В то же время, локальные практики примирения демонстрируют определённый потенциал, хотя и требуют поддержки со стороны государственных институтов. В выводах отмечается, что приграничные конфликты служат индикаторами более широких политических и социальных преобразований в регионе и требуют комплексного междисциплинарного подхода к анализу. Эффективная стабилизация возможна только при учёте исторического опыта и интересов всех этнических групп региона. Практическая значимость исследования заключается в разработке рекомендаций по предотвращению эскалации приграничных конфликтов и созданию устойчивых механизмов обеспечения региональной безопасности.

Ключові слова: лица без гражданства; вооруженные столкновения; делимитация; демаркация; эскалация; реагирование на кризис