

# THE FERGANA VALLEY AS A SPACE OF CROSS-BORDER POLITICAL INSTABILITY: A GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESS

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## Abstract

This part of the article explores the institutional and geopolitical factors contributing to cross-border political instability in the Fergana Valley during the decade 2015–2025. It focuses on the governance gap that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, emphasizing how the absence of clearly demarcated borders, weak intergovernmental coordination, and fragile local institutions have aggravated disputes among Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The article highlights how smuggling, militarized borders, and inconsistent water-sharing policies created flashpoints for conflict. Despite these challenges, the analysis also recognizes positive trends, including Uzbekistan's diplomatic turn toward regional cooperation post-2016 and the 2025 Kyrgyz-Tajik border agreement. The findings suggest that sustainable stability in the Fergana Valley depends on institutional reform, inclusive governance, and regionally coordinated frameworks for conflict prevention and resource management.

**Keywords:** Fergana Valley, institutional weakness, border demarcation, cross-border governance, Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan conflict, Uzbekistan foreign policy, enclave disputes, resource management, regional diplomacy, post-Soviet Central Asia.

## Introduction

Beyond the ethnic and geographic factors, a critical driver of the Fergana Valley's instability has been the weakness of institutions – at both the domestic and inter-state levels – to govern cross-border issues effectively. The collapse of Soviet authority in 1991 removed the centralized framework that had previously coordinated resource-sharing and conflict resolution. In its place emerged three new states with differing political systems and interests. Over the past three decades, and particularly from 2015 to 2025, the valley has suffered from a governance gap: the mechanisms to peacefully manage disputes and the rule of law at the periphery have frequently proven inadequate.

One fundamental issue was the slow and opaque process of border delimitation and demarcation. As of the mid-2010s, large sections of the international borders in the Fergana Valley remained undemarcated. Villagers often did not know whether a particular land belonged to one country or another. In the Kyrgyz-Tajik context, the 2021 and 2022 conflicts

occurred in unmarked areas where both sides asserted claims.[1] The lack of clear borders hampered law enforcement, created space for smuggling, and exacerbated misunderstandings. Border security forces and local authorities sometimes aggravated tensions. There were reports of poorly trained personnel responding with excessive force to minor transgressions. Until recently, there were no joint communication channels or hotlines to manage real-time incidents.[2] Institutional weaknesses were not only bilateral but also domestic: for instance, Kyrgyzstan's frequent changes of government meant inconsistent policy, while Tajikistan's centralization came at the cost of local responsiveness.

Water management was another area of friction. The valley's irrigation systems, built during the Soviet era, now traverse national borders. The absence of a trilateral basin authority and the use of water as a geopolitical lever have led to recurring disputes. The problem was compounded by a lack of coordinated economic development. Smuggling and shadow economies thrived in the absence of legal trade and joint infrastructure.[3] During the COVID-19 pandemic, borders were sealed without coordination, cutting off communities from basic services.

Yet, institutional progress began to emerge in the latter half of the decade. The most dramatic improvement came with Uzbekistan's policy shift after 2016, which prioritized regional diplomacy. Uzbekistan resolved most of its border disputes with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan by 2022. In 2025, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan finalized their border delimitation agreement.[4] Though implementation challenges remain, this represents a substantial step toward regional stabilization.

The valley's instability is shaped by the interests of both regional and international actors. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan each view the valley through a strategic lens. Uzbekistan sees it as vital to its economy and security. Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan adopted a cooperative stance, resolving disputes and promoting regional connectivity. Kyrgyzstan, while domestically volatile, recognized the need for stability and worked toward agreements, especially under economic and security pressures. Tajikistan, concerned with sovereignty and regime survival, held firm on territorial claims but ultimately engaged in dialogue.

Among external powers, Russia has traditionally positioned itself as the primary security guarantor in Central Asia. However, during the 2021–2022 Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflicts, Moscow's role remained largely symbolic rather than operational. Despite having military bases in both countries and leading the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia refrained from direct involvement. The CSTO's inability to intervene—primarily because both parties to the conflict were member states—exposed critical limitations of the organization's collective defense mechanism. Furthermore, Russia's strategic focus shifted dramatically toward its invasion of Ukraine beginning in 2022, diminishing its bandwidth and leverage in Central Asia.[5] This realignment prompted local actors to seek alternative or supplementary partnerships beyond Moscow's traditional sphere of influence.

China, in contrast, played a more subtle but increasingly influential role. It prioritized regional stability primarily to protect its long-term economic investments, particularly those under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The proposed China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, intended

to enhance regional connectivity and trade, underscored Beijing's strategic interest in a stable Fergana Valley. Although China did not mediate directly in the 2021–2022 clashes, its diplomatic engagement—characterized by behind-the-scenes communication and financial inducements—reportedly encouraged de-escalation.[6] Additionally, China has supported bilateral security cooperation with Tajikistan, including infrastructure funding for border outposts and counterterrorism training.

Turkey and Iran have also sought to increase their influence, albeit to a lesser degree. Turkey's involvement primarily focused on expanding military and cultural ties with Kyrgyzstan, including the sale of advanced Bayraktar TB2 drones, which were reportedly deployed in the 2022 conflict. Ankara's pan-Turkic diplomatic rhetoric and soft power initiatives, such as education programs and religious outreach, further deepened its foothold in Turkic-majority regions. Iran, aligning more closely with Tajikistan due to shared linguistic and cultural heritage, signed new security agreements, including the construction of a joint drone production facility in Dushanbe.[7] This marked a shift in regional alignments and a hedging strategy against overreliance on Russia or China.

Western actors, while less visible in military terms, contributed significantly through developmental, normative, and peacebuilding frameworks. The European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have promoted inclusive governance, interethnic dialogue, and sustainable development in the Fergana Valley. Their programs often focus on grassroots initiatives: for example, cross-border environmental cooperation, youth engagement in conflict prevention, and support for local water user associations. The OSCE, in particular, facilitated dialogue platforms between border communities and offered training for border guards in de-escalation techniques. Following the 2022 violence, EU and OSCE officials called for independent investigations and emphasized human rights obligations—adding normative pressure on the conflicting parties.

In summary, while no external actor dominated the resolution of Fergana's conflicts, their combined influence shaped the strategic calculations of local governments. The competition—and occasional cooperation—among Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, and Western institutions forms a multi-vector external landscape, in which Central Asian states increasingly navigate with pragmatic flexibility. This evolving geopolitical balance has encouraged regional actors to assume more ownership of local conflicts, while leveraging external engagement selectively to bolster their strategic autonomy and economic development. The Fergana Valley remains one of Central Asia's most geopolitically sensitive yet potentially cooperative regions. Over the past decade (2015–2025), the valley has witnessed both the escalation of violent conflicts and significant diplomatic breakthroughs. This duality underscores that while institutional weaknesses have fueled instability, renewed regional engagement and political will offer a foundation for sustainable peace.[8] At the heart of persistent tensions lies the complex intersection of ethnicity, natural resource distribution, and arbitrarily drawn state boundaries inherited from the Soviet period. These overlapping fault lines have made the region particularly prone to border disputes, ethnic clashes, and disputes over access to land and water.

However, the transformative shift in Uzbekistan's foreign policy after 2016 and the eventual conclusion of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border agreement in 2025 serve as critical examples of how regional leadership can foster reconciliation and cooperation.

To address the root causes of instability, several policy measures are essential. First, it is imperative to finalize and implement border agreements through transparent, inclusive processes that actively engage affected communities. Second, a permanent trilateral platform—such as a “Fergana Valley Council”—should be established to ensure regular dialogue and coordination among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Third, joint mechanisms for managing shared water and land resources must be developed, grounded in principles of equity and sustainability. Fourth, the promotion of cross-border economic zones and infrastructure projects can foster mutual economic interdependence and reduce incentives for conflict. Fifth, each country must improve the political inclusion of ethnic minorities, particularly in governance and security sectors, to address historical grievances and prevent marginalization. Sixth, the demilitarization of sensitive border areas and the development of communication protocols between security forces can prevent local incidents from escalating. Seventh, international organizations should continue supporting trust-building initiatives, independent monitoring, and technical assistance. Finally, long-term peacebuilding depends on people-to-people diplomacy: civil society exchanges, educational programs, and youth and women's initiatives must be expanded to foster interethnic understanding and cross-border solidarity.

In sum, while the Fergana Valley has been a stage for repeated conflict, it now stands at a crossroads. With sustained commitment, coordinated governance, and inclusive development, the region can transform from a fault line into a model of transboundary cooperation in post-Soviet Eurasia. With sustained commitment, the Fergana Valley can evolve from a zone of conflict to a model of cross-border cooperation in Central Asia. The journey will be complex, but the foundations laid between 2015 and 2025 offer a realistic path forward for peace, prosperity, and regional integration.

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