

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

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Abstract

The Fergana Valley, a fertile and densely populated region spanning parts of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, has been a persistent hotspot of cross-border political instability in Central Asia. Over the past decade (2015–2025), this valley has witnessed a complex interplay of ethnic tensions, border disputes, and the legacy of arbitrarily drawn frontiers that continue to fuel conflicts. This article provides a geopolitical analysis of the Fergana Valley's instability, examining the region's unique specifics, its ethnic mosaic and conflict history. Drawing on scholarly literature and case studies, the article concludes that these dynamics continue to require concerted attention to mitigate the risks of future escalation.

Keywords: Fergana Valley, cross-border conflict, ethnic tensions, geopolitical instability, Central Asia, border disputes, enclaves, regional security, post-Soviet space, conflict resolution.

Introduction

The Fergana Valley is one of Central Asia's most historically vibrant yet politically fragile regions. Approximately the size of Costa Rica, the valley is home to over 10–15 million people concentrated in an area where the territories of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan meet. This dense population, combined with the patchwork of ethnic groups and an inheritance of convoluted borders from the Soviet era, has made the valley a tinderbox of cross-border tensions. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Fergana Valley has experienced numerous episodes of instability – ranging from inter-ethnic violence to armed incursions and border skirmishes – that transcend any single country and threaten regional security.

Crucially, the modern boundaries in the Fergana Valley were drawn in the 1920s by Soviet mapmakers with little regard for local demographics or geography. The result was a mosaic of enclaves, divided communities, and shared resources that, once overseen by a unitary Soviet authority, suddenly became points of contention between newly independent states. Cross-border political instability in this context refers to conflicts and governance challenges that involve multiple neighboring states or spill across their frontiers.[1] The Fergana Valley exemplifies such instability: local disputes in one corner of the valley can quickly draw in actors from neighboring countries, and domestic weaknesses often have transnational ramifications.

Over the last decade, the dynamics in the Fergana Valley have evolved in significant ways. The period from 2015 to 2025 has seen both worrying escalations and hopeful breakthroughs. On one hand, long-simmering disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over border demarcation and resource use erupted into open conflict in 2021 and 2022. On the other hand, the region also witnessed a diplomatic thaw and pragmatic cooperation, spurred in part by a change of leadership in Uzbekistan after 2016. Under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan shifted toward



regional engagement, resulting in improved relations and historic border agreements. These contrasting developments underscore the valley's volatility as well as its potential for conflict resolution through dialogue.

Geopolitical Specifics of the Fergana Valley. The Fergana Valley's geography and history have bestowed it with several unique characteristics that underpin its geopolitical significance – and its propensity for instability. Physically, the valley is an intermontane bowl of fertile land, roughly 300 km long and up to 70 km wide, encircled by the Tien Shan and Pamir mountain ranges. This terrain funnels a number of rivers (including tributaries of the Syr Darya) into the valley, making it one of Central Asia's agricultural heartlands. Intensive cotton, fruit, and silk production under the Soviet Union attest to its fertility. The abundance of water and arable land in an otherwise arid region has long made Fergana a coveted prize; yet these same resources must now be shared by three different countries, introducing competition where there was once centralized management.

Demographically, the Fergana Valley is the most densely populated area in post-Soviet Central Asia. Nearly one-third of the region's people live in this relatively small valley. Population pressure is compounded by ethnic intermixing that does not align with republican boundaries: Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks (and smaller minorities) have co-inhabited the valley for centuries, resulting in a patchwork of communities. The city of Osh in Kyrgyzstan, for instance, is predominantly Uzbek in heritage despite being in a Kyrgyz-majority state. Similarly, parts of Uzbekistan's section of the valley include pockets of ethnic Tajiks and Kyrgyz.[2] This demographic mosaic means that each state in the valley hosts significant minority populations of the others' titular ethnicities, a factor that has often made internal issues spill across borders. Perhaps the most vexing geopolitical feature of the Fergana Valley is the legacy of irregular borders and enclaves left by Soviet-era delimitation. When Soviet planners drew internal boundaries in the 1920s–1930s, they sought to divide ethnic groups among different Union republics as a means of divide-and-rule, while also ensuring each republic had a mix of resources. The result was highly convoluted frontiers that, upon the USSR's dissolution, became international borders guarded by militaries and border police. Dozens of enclaves and exclaves were stranded in the process: small territories belonging to one republic entirely surrounded by another. In the Fergana Valley, there were eight enclaves as of the 2010s. The largest is Sokh, a 352 km² pocket of Uzbek territory inside Kyrgyzstan – populated overwhelmingly (~99%) by ethnic Tajiks. Nearby lies Shohimardon, another Uzbek exclave in Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan's own enclave Vorukh nestled within Kyrgyzstan's Batken province. Until recently, Kyrgyzstan even had a tiny exclave of its own (Barak village) trapped inside Uzbekistan. The enclaves pose extreme governance challenges: they are connected to their home country only by thin corridors or by goodwill of the surrounding state, and their presence has been a constant source of misunderstanding and conflict.[3]

The combination of dense population, multi-ethnic demography, and tangled boundaries means that seemingly minor incidents – a dispute over a patch of land, a scuffle at a border crossing, a shortage of irrigation water – carry an outsized risk of escalation. All three countries in the valley have historical claims and grievances relating to territory and resources. Control of water in upstream areas (mostly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) versus downstream irrigation (largely in



Uzbekistan) has been a perennial strategic concern. Likewise, infrastructure built in the Soviet period often crosses today's borders: an irrigation canal or road might originate in one country but serve communities in another. Such interdependence, without strong coordinating mechanisms, can breed zero-sum thinking.

Ethnic Mosaic and Conflicts. The Fergana Valley's rich ethnic mosaic has at times been marred by inter-ethnic conflicts, some of which rank among the worst violence in Central Asia's recent history. The populations of the valley comprise primarily ethnic Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tajiks, often living in close proximity after centuries of coexistence. While these communities generally interacted peacefully, the stresses of the post-Soviet transition – economic hardship, power vacuums, and rising nationalist politics – ignited latent tensions. Grievances over access to land, jobs, and political representation often acquired an ethnic dimension, especially where one group was seen as dominating local business or governance to the exclusion of others.[4]

In Kyrgyzstan's section of the valley, ethnic Uzbeks form the largest minority and are concentrated in the Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken provinces. In parts of Osh province, Uzbeks are numerically dominant, yet historically they have been underrepresented in government and security structures. This imbalance, coupled with chauvinistic rhetoric from some Kyrgyz nationalists, contributed to periodic outbursts of violence.[5] The most devastating episode occurred in June 2010: Osh and Jalal-Abad cities were convulsed by clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the wake of a Kyrgyz political revolution. The conflict left at least 470 people dead and saw neighborhoods razed; over 400,000 civilians (mostly ethnic Uzbeks) fled, including around 100,000 who took refuge across the border in Uzbekistan. The Osh tragedy deeply scarred inter-ethnic relations.

While Kyrgyz-Uzbek strife grabbed headlines in 2010, Kyrgyz-Tajik communal conflicts in the Fergana Valley borderlands have been more frequent and have escalated sharply over the past decade. Kyrgyzstan's Batken province and Tajikistan's northern Sughd province interface along a winding border where many villages of the two nationalities intermingle. Local competition for pasture, arable plots, and irrigation water has led to numerous skirmishes. Over time, what began as localized communal clashes became increasingly militarized. A turning point came in April 2021 when a dispute over a surveillance camera at a water intake escalated into sustained firefights between the two countries' security forces. The confrontation resulted in over 50 deaths and hundreds of injuries. In September 2022, an even more intense outbreak occurred, with tanks, mortars, and armed drones used. Nearly 100 people were killed, and over 140,000 Kyrgyz residents were displaced.

While Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been at the forefront of cross-border fighting recently, Uzbekistan's role has been more indirect in the last decade. During the 1990s and 2000s, Uzbekistan took a hardline stance towards instability in the valley, including mining parts of its borders. However, in the 2015–2025 period, Uzbekistan has not been directly involved in armed clashes.[6] Rather, it shifted toward reconciliation, resolving long-standing disputes through diplomacy. Yet, some incidents involving Uzbek enclaves (such as Sokh) continued to occasionally provoke tensions.

The Fergana Valley, despite its rich historical and cultural legacy, remains a zone of pronounced geopolitical sensitivity and recurrent instability in contemporary Central Asia. Its dense



demographic concentration, interwoven ethnic composition, and unresolved border issues inherited from the Soviet period continue to challenge the region's cohesion and peace. Over the past three decades, the valley has become a flashpoint for cross-border tensions that consistently transcend national boundaries, reflecting deeper structural and institutional weaknesses. Addressing the Fergana Valley's fragility requires not only formal border agreements and resource-sharing mechanisms but also sustained political will, inclusive governance, and multilateral engagement. If managed cooperatively, the valley holds the potential to transform from a theatre of rivalry into a model of regional integration and durable peace in Central Asia.

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