

BACKGROUND PAPER FOR THE CONFERENCE
“Comparing Regional Environmental Governance in East Asia and Europe (EE-REG)”
January 24-25, 2013, Kyoto, Japan

THE GREAT MOUNTAIN GAME: REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

Gilles RUDAZ
Department of Geography & Environment, University of Geneva, Switzerland

Introduction

In the early 1990's, Central Asia was a region at the periphery of the former Soviet system that just had collapsed. However, the region came back strong on international political agendas for two key reasons: energy (and to a lesser extend mineral resources) and war against terror initiated in the post 9-11 era. The new States emerging from the dislocation of the USSR had to redefine their cooperation at the regional level. They also entered the international political arena and came on board of the simultaneously emerging global agenda promoting sustainable development. In this latter context, specific attention was devoted to mountains and resonated specifically in the Central Asian region.

In this paper, I focus on sustainable development strategies in relation to mountain areas and its resonance at the regional level. I discuss the three main ways regional cooperation has been conceived in relation to sustainable mountain development. First, I address the core regional issue of transboundary management of water, where mountains are conceived as water towers. Second, I consider the positioning of Central Asia towards the global mountain agenda, i.e. an agenda for mountains elaborated at the international level. Third, I discuss the process of up-scaling local initiatives promoting sustainable mountain development.

Because international actors play a decisive role in these processes, I picked up the title of the “mountain great game” in reference to the “Great Game”, which is the name given to rivalry between the British and Russian Empires to extend their influence to the region and that extended for about a century, between 1813 and 1907.

A brief overview of the region of Central Asia and its mountains

Central Asia is a huge region with blurred borders extending between the Caspian Sea and China, and between Afghanistan and Russia. With the collapse of the USSR, the region has come to be defined as the area covered by the five republics of the former Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and that is this latter definition that I am going to refer to. These five republics emerged less than a century ago (1924), out of a former Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic established in 1918. These borders were drawn along ethnic lines by Joseph Stalin, at the time Commissar for Nationalities. This delineation based on ethnicity explained the presence of territories in other countries, called "mountain enclaves" (Hugues 2012, p.47). During soviet time, it retained little attention, but with the independence, they persisted and led to more tensions.

With the collapse of the Soviet system, the region has faced major changes, mainly the transition from a planned to a market economy and change in the political organization with attempts to promote democracy. In an enthusiastic publication (2009) about Central Asian countries, the the EU Council stated that “They have established statehood, safeguarded multi-ethnic understanding and inter- religious communication. By joining the OSCE, they subscribed to the Organization’s values, standards and commitments. By signing the United Nations Millennium Declaration they set themselves ambitious goals”. However, it is hard to generalize statements for Central Asia as a region. The newly independent States of Central Asia took very different paths in government and come to different political systems. However, strong political power remains the trend, with the notable exception of Kyrgyzstan (Roy 2005). The Central Asian countries also took different economic paths. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan benefit from capital flows related to their energy resources, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan face more economic difficulties.

With the independence, there is a shift from one centralized system to five independent States. The collapse of USSR did not reinforced regional cooperation. On the contrary, nationalism has been reinforced since independence (Roy 2005). International organizations try to stimulate regional collaboration, like the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) launched in 1998 and which aims to strengthen subregional cooperation in Central Asia and its integration into the world economy. Regarding sustainability, the Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development in Central Asia was created in 1994. It launched an Action Plan (2001), a Framework Convention (2006) and a Strategy (2007-2008), all aiming at promoting the sustainable development of Central Asia region.

Focusing specifically on mountains, when one look at the region overall, mountains cover about 20% of Central Asia, i.e. 800'000 Km². When one looks at country profiles, we come to the following statistics: Tajikistan 93%, Kyrgyzstan 90%, Uzbekistan 20%, Kazakhstan 10%, Turkmenistan 5% (Hugues 2012, p.18). We can see that Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have almost the inverse proposition. The mountains of Central Asia comprised not a single mountain range but several. Two of Asia’s major mountain ranges – the Pamirs in Tajikistan and the Tien Shan in Kyrgyzstan. Mountain ecosystems also cover parts of Eastern Kazakhstan (Kazakh uplands, Djungar Alatau, Tarbagatai and Altai), southeast Uzbekistan (Western Tien Shan and Gissar) and Turkmenistan (Kopet-Dag and Kugitang), and extend into Afghanistan (Hindu Kush) and China (Eastern Tien Shan and Pamir). Several are transboundary: Djungar Alatau (KZ-RU), Tarbagatai (KZ-RU); Altai (KZ-RU-CN), Tien-Shan (KG, CN, KZ, UZ), Pamir-Alai (TJ, KZ, AF, CN), Gissar (UZ-TJ), Kopet-Dag (UZ, IR) (Hugues 2012).

Mountains, the water towers of Central Asia

At the regional level, the core issue is water. From an administrative and technical matter during Soviet period, water management became a central political matter since independence of the Central Asian republics. Indeed, the political volatility of Central Asia is highly related to water usage and its distribution among countries. The Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC) carried by numerous agencies (UNDP, UNEP, OSCE, NATO, UNECE and REC) has launched initiatives to reduce these tensions.

Mountains of Central Asia play the role of water towers, a classical framing of the mountains (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010). About 90% of the water of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan come from the mountains outside their countries. At the heart of the tensions between highland and lowland countries are the issues of energy accessibility and water usage for irrigation. Lowland need water during the summer for agriculture irrigation, while the upland release water in winter for energy generation through hydroelectric dams. During Soviet time, things ran more smoothly as one centralized system was coordinating the water allocation and energy provision.

Beyond the silk road, one of the most known thing about Central Asia is the Aral Sea crisis, one of the most world-wide famous example of the water resource mismanagement. In the 1960's, the two major rivers feeding the Aral Sea (Amou-Daria and Syr-Daria) were diverted to irrigate cotton, making from Uzbekistan one of the world biggest producer, and some agriculture productions (rice, melons, cereals). 90% of the river flow has been diverted for irrigation. By 2007, the Aral Sea was 10% of its original size. But this environmental disaster extends far beyond the sea, due to the salinization spreading throughout the whole region by the winds.

To address the Aral Sea crisis called for regional cooperation. The Agreement on Cooperation in the Management, Utilization and Protection of Interstate Water Resources was signed in 1992 by representatives of the five Central Asian States. The agreement calls for coordinating the efforts to address the issue. It established an Interstate Commission to implement the agreement. It proposes annual plans for water allocations. One year after the agreement, the five countries signed the Agreement on Joint Actions for Addressing the Problems of the Aral Sea and its Coastal Area, Improving of the Environment and Ensuring the Social and Economic Development of the Aral Sea Region. The new agreement led to the creation of the Interstate Council for the Aral Sea, which is the coordinating body, and the International Fund for the Aral Sea, which is the implementing body and which is considered as "key regional player in water and environmental cooperation" (Hugues 2012, p.92). It works at the scale of the Aral Sea Basin and its motto "From the glaciers to the deltas"¹ shows the interlinkages between upstream and downstream. The aim of the Fund is not only to manage water but more broadly "to improve the environmental and socio-economic situation in the Aral Sea Basin". The Aral Sea and the two major rivers (Amou-Daria and Syr-Daria) have focused most of the attention, but there are hundreds of smaller transboundary river basins shared by riparian countries. In 2003, OSCE, UNECE and UNESCAP initiated the project for the Chu and Talas Rivers and lead to the creation in 2006 of an international commission (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

The framework of highland-lowland could extend beyond the topic of water and notably with the emerging concept of ecosystem services (Rudaz 2012), the mountains of Central Asia having been for instance identified as a hotspot of biodiversity by the non-governmental organization Conservation International. In the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, specific attention is devoted to mountains and the highland-lowland framework is considered as promising: «Maximizing highland-lowland complementarities is crucial for both upstream and downstream communities. Healthy mountain communities require linkages to lowland markets, and lowland populations need mountain people to serve as stewards for upland resources and watersheds» (Körner and Ohsawa 2006).

¹ <http://www.ec-ifas.org/>

Positioning on the international agenda

The countries of Central Asia became independent in 1991, each of them through their own national process. Even if Russia had and still has a tremendous influence on the region, their world broadened tremendously. This is the time when they entered the international political arena as independent countries, looking for new partners for development. The year following their independence is organized the UNCED 1992, held in Rio de Janeiro, and commonly known as the Earth Summit. The conference was a momentum in international cooperation towards sustainability. On one hand, we had a system that collapsed with former satellites expelled. On the other hand, we have a worldwide enthusiastic program, reminiscence of the “end of history”, with new countries integrating the international political arena. It is hard to document this argument of the connection between the two. However, we can argue that sustainability has ranked high and has been fast integrated in the political agendas in Central Asia, whether followed by concrete actions or not.

The UNCED 1992 was the momentum where mountain advocates were able to promote a global agenda for sustainable mountain development (Rudaz 2011). This led to the inscription in Agenda 21, the action plan arising from the conference, of a chapter devoted to mountains - Chapter 13, “Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development”. Switzerland was instrumental in pushing this global mountain agenda and had to rely to its international relays, often landlocked mountainous countries to which it provided international aid. Switzerland had many contacts with Central Asia. Indeed, a month before UNCED, Switzerland joined the FMI and took the lead of a group comprising the Central Asian States among other and became to be known as Helvetistan – a composed name between the official name of Switzerland “Confœderatio Helvetica” , and the “stan”, which refers to the last part of the name of the countries of Central Asia. Against this background, Kyrgyzstan rapidly emerged as a promoter of the cause of mountains in the international political arena. It is at the request of Kyrgyzstan that the UN proclaimed 2002 “International Year of Mountains”. Kyrgyzstan was eager in that role and organized the final and major event of the year: the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit.

“Mountains” could be a label mobilized to gain visibility in the international political arena. In the regional report for Central Asia evaluating the progress towards sustainable mountain development and presented at the Rio+20 Conference (2012), two major recommendations are formulated. It proposed “the creation of a mountain countries group under the auspices of the United Nations” and “the exchange of external debt for an equivalent investment in sustainable development” (Hugues 2012, p.7).

This involvement in the global mountain agenda has impacts at national and regional level, putting mountains on the political agendas. Mountains usually stand low on national political agendas. Indeed, few countries elaborated these (Castelain et al. 2006). Following the impulsion of the International Year of Mountains, the Kyrgyz Republic elaborated a law on mountain territories (2002), further supported a government decree (2007). Tajikistan is in the process of elaborating its own national mountain law. These laws focus on poverty reduction and provide financial support to infrastructures in order to improve the living in mountain areas. At the regional level, the Regional Sustainable Development Strategy of Central Asia stated that the “prosperity of the Central-Asian region depends in many aspects on the health condition of the Pamir and Tien Shan mountainous ecosystems”. The Regional Environmental Action Plan approved in 2001 by all Central Asian States also treats mountain ecosystems as a regional environmental priority. And finally “mountain

ecosystem degradation” is one of the five priority areas of the Framework Convention on Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development of Central Asia.

Upscaling local mountain development projects

Since independence, public expenditures decreased drastically. For instance, regarding health and education, it is about a quarter of what it used to be during Soviet times (Hugues 2012, p.10). Indeed, USSR provided significant economic and social aid to the whole region, included the mountain communities. The newly independent states could not maintain this level of support to these remote areas. With the introduction of the market economy, many jobs were lost, with the consequence of the outmigration of the male working force.

Poverty reduction is at the core of many international programs. International aid focuses on: economic and social reforms, and on resource management. Numerous international aid agencies work at the local level, involved in small mountain development project, as mountain is an appealing label for some donors. Sustainable development is most of the time the overarching principle of these projects. Many of them imply a political dimension, as they aim to promote civil society, capacity building and more broadly empowerment of mountain communities.

A key example is the Central Asian Mountain Partnership (CAMP), initiated by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and focusing on Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. The sponsor, SDC, states the positive influence of the international recognition of the importance of mountains: “This project became especially relevant in the wake of the year 2002 which was declared the International Year of Mountains by the United Nations. At that time Central Asian states received a rare opportunity to attract the world's attention to the problems of rural people living in mountain areas”². With sustainable mountain development as an agenda, CAMP is active in four main areas: resource use, product development and marketing, village development, and policy dialogue. The basic assumption is that better management of resources management of resources would lead to better living conditions for mountain communities. A central feature of the program is the support of local organization promoting policy dialogue to address development and conservation issues.

Aiming at benefiting from the impetus launched by the Bishkek Mountain Summit (KG), the world’s major event concluding the International Year of Mountains, was created the Alliance of Central Asian Mountain Communities (Nikonova et al. 2007). It is a network of mountain communities from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan who exchange information and experiences, with aim of implementing sustainable mountain development. There was an initial idea to also be a lobby for the cause of mountains in the region, but it was dropped. CAMP played a decisive role in implementing AGOCA. By having innovative communities involved in sustainable mountain development, the idea is that exchanges of good practices could spread throughout the region. In this context, capacity building is an essential feature of the process.

The “Pamir-Alai Land Management” project (PALM) follows a similar logic. It works at the scale of the mountain range, which is transboundary between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The project

² http://www.swiss-cooperation.admin.ch/centralasia/en/Home/Regional_Activities/Completed_projects/Mountain_Partnership; accessed on January 10, 2013.

was initiated by the two countries, the Global Environmental Facility, the United Nations Environment Program and the United Nations University. It promoted jointly development and conservation objectives, under the overarching aim of sustainable development. Having the States on board (TJ, KG), PALM definitely enhanced regional cooperation. However, a key feature is also the mobilization of the local level, as 114 micro-projects were promoted. Another key feature of PALM is that the up-scaling and replication of the lessons learned to other mountain regions of Central Asia is a stated objective. Both CAMP and PALM believe in the capacity of local mountain communities to be stewards of resources for the benefits of people within the region and beyond.

Conclusion

For historical reasons, regional cooperation in Central Asia has been difficult. Mountains emerged as an issue that could enhance further regional cooperation. In this paper, I showed that the regional cooperation referring to mountains in Central Asia is embedded in an international agenda for mountains framed under the overarching principle of sustainable development.

National mountain laws (KG, TJ) could secure the political recognition of mountains. However, it seems that the mountains of Central Asia will remain on the political agenda, when connected to broader global mountain agenda. As it is stated in the report on Central Asia done for the Rio+20 Conference, “the Central Asian mountains provide an astonishing array of essential ecosystem goods and services not only to mountain inhabitants but also to people in the lowlands and around the globe” (Hugues 2012, p.6). The label mountains provide a positioning both for mountain States and mountain communities of Central Asia as they can present themselves as stewards of resources whose importance extend far beyond the region.

References

- Castelein, Annie, Thi Thuy, Mekouar M., Villeneuve, A. . 2006. *Mountains and the Law: Emerging Trends*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization.
- Council of the European Union, 2009, *The European Union and Central Asia : The New Partnership in Action*, European Communities, Brussels
- Debarbieux, B., and Rudaz G., 2010. *Les faiseurs de montagne: Imaginaires politiques et territorialités, XVIIIe–XXIe siècle*. Paris: CNRS Editions
- Hughes, G. (ed.), 2012, *Sustainable Mountain Development. From Rio 1992 to 2012 and beyond. Central Asia Mountains*, Zoï Environment Network, Geneva
- Körner C., and Ohsawa M., 2006, «Mountain systems», in: R. Hassan et al. (eds.), *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment – Ecosystem and human well-being: current state and trends*, Washington, pp. 681–716.
- Nikonova V., Rudaz G. and Debarbieux B., 2007, “Mountain communities in Central Asia: Networks and new forms of governance”, *Mountain Research Development*, n°1, pp.24-27.
- Roy, O. 2005, *L’Asie Centrale Contemporaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris.
- Rudaz G. 2011, «The Cause of Mountains: The Politics of Promoting a Global Agenda», *Global Environmental Politics*, 4, pp. 43–65.
- Rudaz G., 2012 « Institutionnalisation de la distinction hautes-terres-basses terres, entre domination et résistance », *Histoire des Alpes*, n°17, pp.57-66.