

INTERVIEW

Dursun Yıldız, Director of Hydropolitics Academy: Transboundary Water Problems in Central Asia Have Region-Specific Character!



D.Yıldız , Director Hydropolitics Academy.Turkey

By. ATANER YÜCE (UHA)

ANKARA- National News Agency (UHA) NEWS / Central Asia, which has a water (management) problem, has some specific features that separate it from other regions of the world that have water problems. Central Asia is a somehow isolated region located in unique geography where interdependence and cooperation can be developed very effectively. In addition, there is no possibility to create other alternative water sources such as seawater treatment, fossil water, other than water reuse in the region. This condemns countries to a common fate in water use.

As (UHA) International News Agency, we wanted to discuss this issue with Dursun Yıldız, who is an expert on the subject, knowing the region very well, went to Central Asia and made on-site investigations, the author of two books on Central Asia water problems, lecturer at İzmir Institute of Technology (İYTE), Director of Hydropolitics Academy Center.

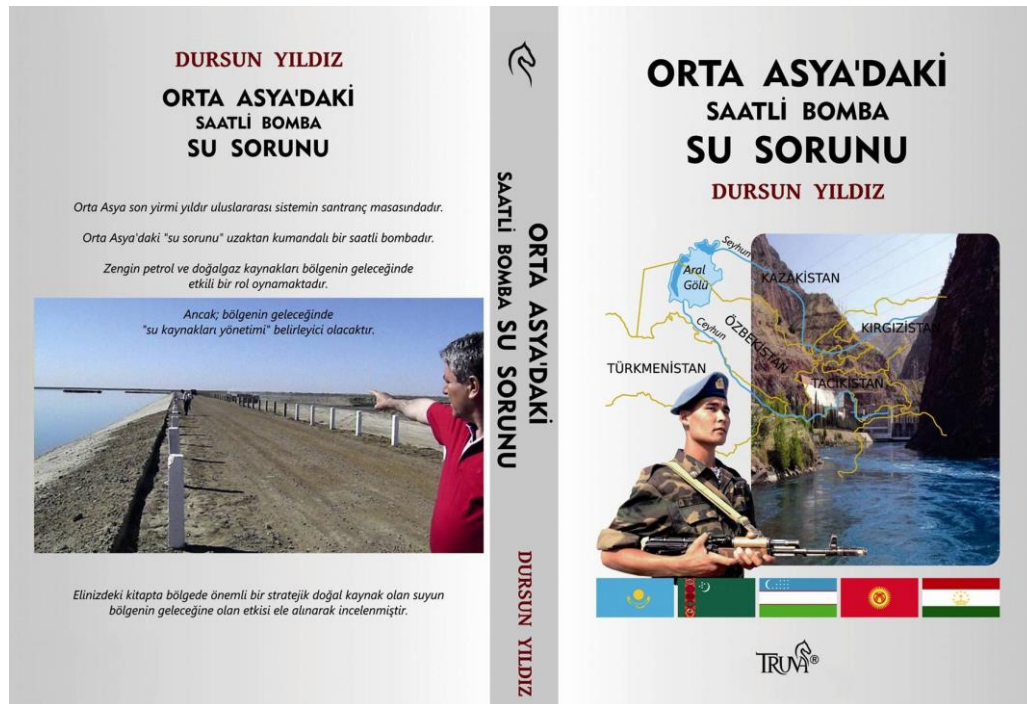
UHA: Dear Mr. Yıldız, is the use of water in the region not only the use of the water of transboundary rivers but also the use of strategic resources on which the socio-

economic development of the countries in the region is directly dependent and under the influence of climate change?

Dursun YILDIZ: The fact that water is a strategic natural resource under the influence of climate change can be seen in many transboundary river basins. However, the importance and weight of this effect are generally different for riparian countries. In Central Asia, however, the significance of this effect for upstream and downstream countries appears to be different. In other words, all the countries of the region are dependent on the water on an almost equal scale. If the transboundary watershed we are talking about is in closed geographies such as Central Asia and countries need each other, then this problem turns from being a problem between two countries to a problem that awaits a solution on a regional scale. In other words, we can say that all regional countries will benefit from the solution.

UHA: You are an expert on Hydropolitics. What could be the reason for this?

Dursun YILDIZ: Because the topographic and meteorological features of the region, in a sense, force the countries to depend on each other. For example, part of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can only be reached from the border of Uzbekistan. For most of the year, in harsh climatic conditions, the north of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is disconnected from the south. The trade they make over the railway connection can be disrupted for various reasons. On the other hand, there are Uzbek autonomous regions as small cities within the borders of Kyrgyzstan. Their transportation to Uzbekistan can also be provided by passing through Kyrgyzstan. Water resources in two countries of the region, hydrocarbon resources are collected in the other three countries. All these conditions reveal the necessity of interdependence in the region and the inevitable cooperation on water.



UHA: You have been in Central Asia and wrote two books on what you have observed there. . You mention that the Water Problem has a Region-Specific Character. What are they?

Dursun YILDIZ: Yes I have been there ,it is seen that some conditions specific to the region are effective in the water problems of Central Asia. It is possible to list these basic water problem areas as follows.

- The water problem in Central Asia is not a physical one ,it is national and regional water management problem
- The region's water and energy resources planning and infrastructure is central planning from the USSR period, and re-planning it for each country creates problems.
- After the disintegration of the USSR, the use of water differed according to the national development plans of the countries.
- Disputes arose due to the different needs of countries on water demand and water supply.
- Countries' contribution to water is unequal and their usage demands are disproportionate.
- Although Turkmenistan has no contribution to water, it draws a lot of water and uses it inefficiently, creating tension.
- There is unique geography in the region where the borders of countries such as Fergana Valley are intertwined. There are ethnic tensions (Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz) and water use problems in the Fergana Valley.
- There are two other actors of the region's water resources, namely Iran and Afghanistan. The future involvement of Iran and Afghanistan in the Central Asian water problems will aggravate the water problem. Iran, which has not been involved in this issue so far, has 3% to the water. While Afghanistan contributes 5 percent, both countries only draw 1 percent of the water for now.





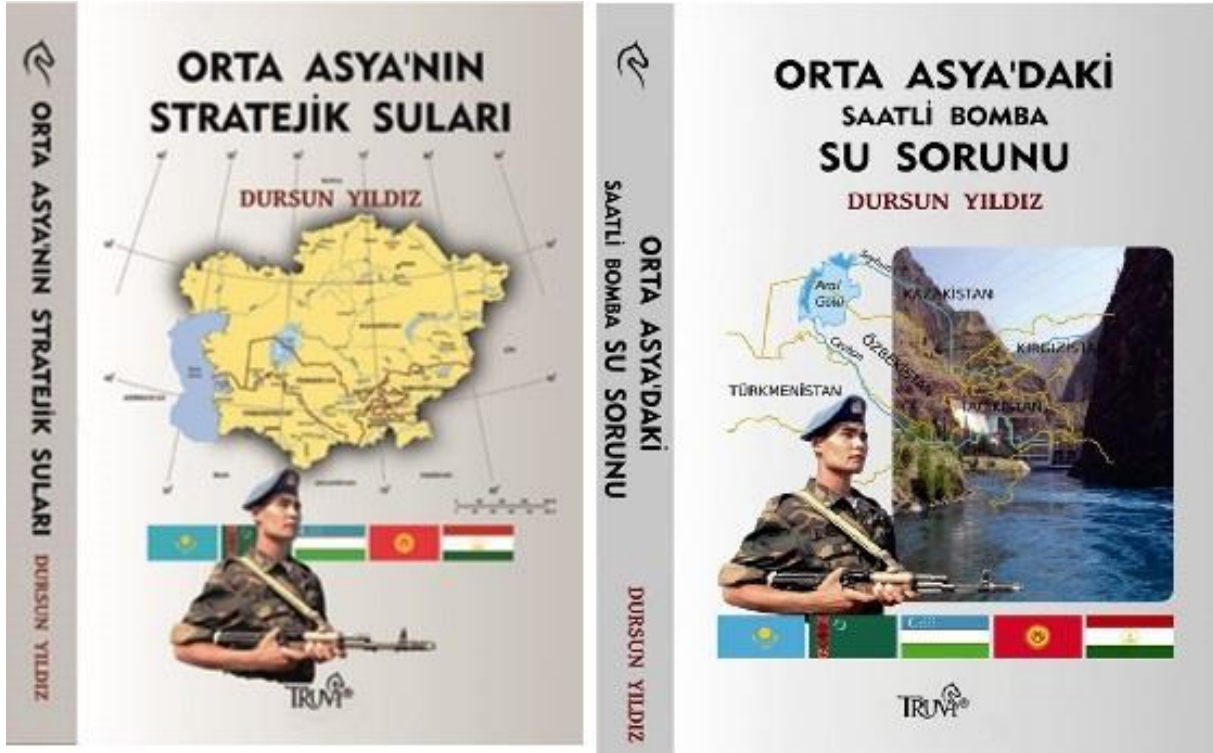
UHA: Turkic tribes, who come from the same ancestry in the Turkish World and do not have definite differences apart from Tajiks, were systematically mixed in the USSR period and turned into a problem that is used today under the name of ethnic identity conflict. E.g; Uzbeks make up 72 percent of the population in Uzbekistan, 24 percent in Tajikistan, 14 percent in Kyrgyzstan, and 9 percent in Turkmenistan. How will this affect regional cooperation?

Dursun YILDIZ: Only Turkmenistan is the country with the least other communities' population in the region. These rates are higher in other countries. However, Central Asia, which has been made so ethnically mixed, is not a structure ready to disintegrate as a result of tensions between ethnic structures, as it has been kneaded with Turkish identity for centuries. This structure can only be dismantled by provoking the increasing tension after the region is left behind economically and living standards fall further. Therefore, in this region, It is very important to implement socio-economic policies aimed at eliminating the factors that will feed the tension. For this, especially the upper basin countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan need to develop

UHA: That is why water is a very important resource for all countries in the region, especially for the upper basin countries.

Dursun YILDIZ: It's true, cooperation is mandatory in the region, but it is developing slowly. This region has specific water problems that separate the region from other regions of the world.

Central Asia is a landlock, isolated region and is in unique geography where interdependence and cooperation can be developed very effectively. In this isolated, closed area, there is no possibility to create other alternative water sources such as seawater treatment, fossil water, etc., other than the efficient use of water in cooperation and reuse by purification. Moreover, climate change suppresses water resources in the region. All these conditions condemn countries to a common fate in water management and use. However, although the softening relations between countries in Central Asia show hope compared to the past, there is still a long way to go for sustainable water cooperation



UHA: What needs to be done to step further?

Dursun YILDIZ: The disintegration of the USSR eliminated the relationship between task sharing and dependency on hydropower and agricultural production for this region. The richness of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in terms of hydrocarbon reserves has created an opportunity for cooperation in the fields of water and energy. However, cooperation could not be established based on hydrocarbon energy resources and water resources supplement among riparian states. In other words, primary energy resources (oil, natural gas, coal) and water have not yet played the necessary role in developing interdependence relations between Central Asian countries. Although there are some dialogs between countries, there is a need for a radical step that will initiate water cooperation in the region and show that the paradigm of the cold war period has changed. There are many agreements signed for water cooperation between the countries of the region, but they have little effect in practice. Because the implementation of these agreements requires a shared vision, shared goal, and unity of effort for regional development. For this reason, the completion of the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan and the Kambarata 1 Dam in Kyrgyzstan, whose construction has been disrupted for nearly half a century will be a very important step towards cooperation for regional economic development.

UHA: Is there any hope for cooperation in the region?

Dursun YILDIZ: Even though no great progress has been made so far in Central Asia, cooperation diplomacy continues. Some historical reasons might affect positively the progress of cooperation. For example, Central Asian countries have some common thoughts coming from the period under the central administration of the USSR. These common thoughts and concepts have not completely disappeared. For this reason, the distrust of Central Asian societies to each other is different from the lack of confidence in the Middle East. Despite some conflict between the communities in the region, the peoples of Central Asia do not have much reason to feel historical hatred and hostility towards each other. Since the geography of Central Asia has been kneaded with Turkish culture for centuries, the ethnic structure of the region does not resemble the simple tribal structure of the Middle East. This is an important factor that enables to continue cooperation intention between regional states. However, due to the increasing geopolitical importance of the region and increasing external political plans delay this cooperation



UHA: From time to time, even if it is small, peoples have some discomfort with each other in Central Asia. The most important of the areas that feed security problems in the region is social disturbances. What do you think about it?

Dursun YILDIZ: Socio-economic policies that will eliminate the social problems in Central Asia will be the most important factor that will ensure the stability of the region. Economic-based social unrest in the region is the most important factor that increases the possibility of

confusion. For example, in very unique regions such as the Fergana Valley, some difficulties carried over from the past in terms of water supply and soil still have not been eliminated.

This provides the necessary environment and opportunity for those who make a plan to turn the already fragile relations into conflicts in the region. For this reason, cooperation in water management in the region will eliminate many problems. This cooperation may facilitate spillover effect on other areas and play a very important role in reducing social tension. The solution of existing security problems in the region requires mutually beneficial regional development projects and visionary development policies

UHA: It is a fact that the stones have not yet settled in Central Asia. In this period, it is not easy to take water diplomacy steps that will ensure regional cooperation in Central Asia. However, the necessity and defining feature of this for the region is seen.

Dursun YILDIZ:It is true. In November 2018, the President of Tajikistan Imamali Rahman inaugurated the first unit of the Rogun Hydroelectric Power Plant (HEPP) with a capacity of 600 megawatts (MW). The second unit of the HEPP was commissioned in September 2019. All these are very important milestones in the way of cooperation between countries. We can say that completion of the HEPP, which has been under construction for more than forty years, will have important consequences not only for the country's economy but also for the stability of the region. Progress of the Rogun and Kambarata 1 Dams will play a very important role to cooperate on water management and facilitate interdependence. It should be seen that water conflicts to be experienced herein Central Asia has the potential to create a result that invites instability and external forces by having a domino effect. It is already seen that the positive impact of flexible water diplomacy and innovative hydro-politics on regional development in Central Asia will be enormous.

UHA: Then, Why do you say that this cooperation will take time?

Dursun YILDIZ: It should be seen that the establishment of water cooperation in Central Asia will take time like other examples in the world. Completion of dams and HEPP Completion of the dams will be an important step for the region, but there will be much work to be done based on more mutual understanding and cooperation. The most important obstacle to the effective realization of water use in Central Asia is the fact

that the countries in the region do not have effective water use policies and infrastructures. In this regard, this requires time in the region.

The completion of projects such as Rogun and Kambarata1 will accelerate the development in the fields of electric energy transfer and affect regional cooperation in many areas like current commercial relations developments in the textile sector.

UHA: Do you think these projects are key projects for water cooperation in Central Asia?

Dursun YILDIZ: Yes, because the region is still on the chess table of the international system. For this reason, Central Asian countries should cooperate in these critical projects instead of trying to develop their water resources by relying on their international relations or opposing

some projects. These projects are the key projects of cooperation in Central Asia, and if they are implemented, progress can be made in many areas, social, economic, and political.

UHA: Are you saying that the water problem of the region should be dealt with in a wider social, economic, and political context outside of this limited framework?

Dursun YILDIZ: Yes, Because the water problems in the region are directly related to the development policies of the countries interlinked energy needs, agricultural production, and employment policies. A sustainable agreement on water management in the region will mean the acceptance of not only water use but also a step further for multidimensional cooperation in the region. This can create spill over effects leading many positive socio-economic and socio-political development issues.



UHA: Mr. Yıldız, why water cooperation is so difficult?

Dursun YILDIZ: When we look at Central Asia in general, we see a land lock region and intertwined countries . While this situation is expected to be effective in increasing cooperation in relations between countries, this has not occurred sufficiently. There are many internal, external, and region-specific reasons for this situation, such as the historical background of the region , its current geopolitical situation, external forces plans on the region . This situation creates additional social and political pressure on governments in the region

For these reasons, the problem of lack of trust continues both between the countries of the region and between the communities. In this context, the current situation also limits progress in the field of mutually beneficial cooperation such as water management in the region.

UHA: There are some basic reasons for this region-specific. What do you think?

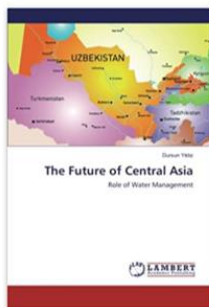
Dursun YILDIZ : Yes there are. I can list them as follows;

- The regional water system was planned with a central understanding during the USSR period, and today, 5 different states are trying to do water management. This creates conflicts of national interest.

- The economies and employment policies of Central Asian countries are directly dependent on irrigated agriculture practices, and the results of this directly affect the country's administration.
- The countries downstream of the rivers in the region are stronger militarily and economically than the countries at the head of the water. This situation creates an asymmetrical power relationship in water problems between countries.

UHA: It seems that the importance of cooperation will be understood in time.

Dursun YILDIZ: Although some countries tried to develop water politics depending on external forces but they realized that they are obliged to manage this resource together with the countries of the region. For instance, Even if Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan gain a hydro strategy superiority by storing water with the dams they will build, it seems that this advantage will not be permanent. There will be many economic and social obstacles in front of this hydropolitics over water sovereignty in such geography. In other words, it is not rational for these countries to break an agreement that will bring many embargoes from energy imports to railroad transportation to the outside world.



The Future of Central Asia: Role of Water Management Paperback – February 11, 2016
by Dursun Yildiz (Author)

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Central Asia has the scene of competition between global forces mainly because of its energy and water potential. Although 25 years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia have made little progress in improving water management and hydropolitical issues. Not scarce of water but mismanagement put the region on to the edge of conflict. Key to success to improved water governance at all levels and a new innovative water diplomacy on the basis of win-win. This book is focusing on this issue from the root of the problems to the new geopolitics axis on Asia Pacific. It also emphasis to need a new sustainable and applicable water politics. It could be worth-reading to politicians, academics, experts, NGO's and all wants to know more about the Central Asia's future.



D. Yildiz Director, Hydropolitics Academy



It is therefore difficult for upstream countries to pursue such hydro-politics. On the other hand, considering that this policy may raise the possibility of a hot conflict in the region, it is seen that the military power of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is much stronger than that of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This is another point that reveals that this policy cannot be easily implemented.

Due to the interest of foreign actors in the region, the countries of the region could not achieve the desired progress in their security policies. In this regard, they are stuck between the Russian Federation and the USA. This situation also had negative effects on the development of water resources for their national interest. However, the countries of the region have recently started to soften their reserves on the development of water resources and dam construction due to regional security and economic concerns. This shows that the importance of the need for cooperation has begun to be understood, albeit with time.



Dursun Yıldız

The Future of Central Asia

Role of Water Management

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