

POLITICS OF PARTITION: UNDERSTANDING BORDER ISSUES IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract. *Border disputes have long been a source of conflict and tension between nations. This paper explores the various border disputes involving Uzbekistan, with a particular focus on issues with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. The study employs a historical analysis of the first division of Central Asian states in the early colonial period to understand the origins of these disputes. The paper presents a detailed examination of Uzbekistan's border problems with Kyrgyzstan, particularly the complexities of enclaves and exclaves, as well as territorial problems with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The paper concludes with a discussion on possible solutions to these border problems, emphasizing diplomatic dialogues and international interventions.*

Keywords: *border demarcation, Central Asia border issues, enclaves, exclaves, regional conflicts, post-soviet states, Central Asian geopolitics.*

Introduction. Exploring the complex issue of border disputes in Central Asia, this article delves into the historical formation of these borders and the controversies they cause for the independent states today. The article discusses the ongoing high-level negotiations involving Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. It highlights the impact of policies, economic pressures, nationalist sentiments, public discontent and mutual mistrust on these negotiations. The potential benefits of a peaceful resolution to these disputes are also examined, including improved regional security, economic cooperation, ethnic relations and counteraction against drug trafficking and religious extremism.

The first division of the Central Asian states in the early colonial period

The disintegration of the Union was one of the most important historical events in the world, leading to profound geopolitical changes around the world. In addition, the collapse of the Soviet Union revealed a number of important issues, including the demarcation of borders between the former Soviet republics. It is known that the former Central Asian Soviet Republics - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - were established by the Soviet government in 1920-30 as a result of national and territorial state delimitation. Their boundaries are conditional in nature and do not take into account the specific features of history and culture. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the political independence of the newly formed republics began the process of creating new national state systems. The republics formed a system of interstate relations, covering areas such as border demarcation between countries. This process was not easy and there were two main reasons: the artificial formation of the Central Asian socialist republics in the early years of Soviet rule and the policies pursued in subsequent years. National and territorial delimitation in Central Asia is a very complex and dramatic process. Historical literary sources give a clear and sometimes contradictory interpretation of this event. However, new existing archival documents have revealed this problem in a new case. The latest archival materials from the Central State Archives of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Tashkent), the Archives of the Office of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Tashkent) and the State Archives of Socio-Political History of Russia (Moscow) were used. As a result of the initial abolition of tsarist rule in Central

Asia, three republics were formed: the Turkestan Soviet Republic of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic, the Khorezm People's Soviet Republics, which existed in 1918– 1924, were the first territorial divisions of Central Asia under the influence of the USSR and the end of the existing tsarist government. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Territorial division of Central Asia in 1918-1924.

As early as the 1920s, a group of national communists led by Turor Risqulov argued that the Turkic peoples were united, that they had common historical roots, religions, traditions and cultures, and that a single Turkestan could not be divided into separate parts. The center's communists rejected the idea, accusing it of "pan-Turkism," "pan-Islamism," "bourgeois nationalism and right-wing bigotry." On June 12, 1924, at the suggestion of JV Stalin, a special resolution of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the RCP "On the national-territorial delimitation of the Central Asian republics" was adopted against this idea. With this decision, the process has entered its final stage. On September 16, 1924, at an extraordinary session of the MIC of the Turkestan ASSR, a decision was made to demarcate the national-territorial boundaries in Central Asia. Decisions of the same content were made on September 20 at the V Congress of People's Deputies of All-Bukhara and on October 29 at the V Congress of People's Deputies of All-Khorezm. On September 20, the Chairman of the Government of the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic Fayzulla Khojaye'v addressed the V Congress of People's Deputies of Bukhara on the national state borders of Central Asia.

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1924, the first formal and clear preparations for national delimitation began. The Central Regional Commission for the National Delimitation of Central Asia of the Central Committee of the RCP was formed. The commission was established on a parity basis and the newly formed representatives included republics and autonomous regions. They were organized under the leadership of the Central Asian, Kazakh ASSR party and Soviet bodies.



Figure 2. Establishment of national-territorial state associations in Central Asia in 1924

In the Central Asian region, the Turkestan ASSR, Bukhara and Khorezm republics were replaced by six national state associations:

- Turkmen SSR;
- Uzbek SSR;
- Tajik ASSR within the Uzbek SSR (until 1929);
- Karakalpak (Kyrgyz) Autonomous Region within the RSFSR;
- Kazakh ASSR within the RSFSR;
- Karakalpak Autonomous Region of the Kazakh ASSR. Later, the Karakalpak ASSR became part of the Uzbek SSR in 1936.

The shorthand reports of the sessions of the Central Territorial Commission have led to national-territorial boundaries that allow us to assess the complexity and multiplicity of questions today. During the discussion of their projects, the National Subcommittee (Uzbek, Turkmen and Kazakh) and the Khorezmian delegation had the same consensus on the form and construction of delimitation, which was a key issue. Representatives of the Uzbek and Turkmen subcommissions

took a strong position on the delimitation of the independent "National Soviet Republics and Autonomous Regions", and the Khorezm delegation took a strong position on the inviolability of the Khorezm Republic.

In turn, the Kazakh subcommittee once again put forward the idea of creating a Soviet Central Asia. During the period of demarcation, the views were more numerous and varied. To address this, technical commissions have been set up at the Central Asian Bureau. The protocols of these technical commissions are sometimes marked as "Top Secret". The technical commissions were to be based on the following fixed principles:

- The ethnic composition of the majority of the population living in the area;
- Non-division of lands of the territories of the new state systems.

However, according to archival materials, these two basic rules have not been observed. In fact, they have been ignored by special directives of higher authorities in line with political ambitions. The Bolshevik delimitation led to a situation in which the number of individuals belonging to one or another ethnic group pushed themselves out of relation to their territory. For example, 433,000 Uzbeks found themselves outside Uzbekistan. Of these, there are 120,000 in what is now Kyrgyzstan; 98,000 in Tajikistan; 78,000 in Kazakhstan; 73,000 in Karakalpakstan; 64,000 in Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan was home to about 82% of all Uzbeks living in the USSR at the time. As a result, the peoples of a single Turkestan were artificially separated from each other. This created great opportunities for the Soviets to consolidate their power in the country. The Karakalpak Autonomous Oblast (February 16, 1925) was formed and was originally part of the Kazakh ASSR. Later, the Karakalpak Autonomous Oblast (part of the RSFSR in 1932, part of the Uzbek SSR from 1936) was reorganized into the Karakalpak ASSR. For the peoples of Central Asia, this limitation and the newly established "national statehood" brought new subtle differences to their further development.

The structure of the Uzbek SSR does not mean that the national statehood of the Uzbek people has been established. The Uzbek SSR, which was part of the USSR, had virtually no independence. From the very beginning of the formation of the Uzbek SSR, it was tasked mainly to serve the interests of the center, to supply raw materials to the central regions of the USSR. These tasks did not cease until the collapse and disintegration of the USSR.

Central Asia-China: Preliminary Agreements on Border Issues

Achieving independence has opened up open opportunities for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to make free choices on the path to sovereign development and to join the world community. After the collapse of the USSR, the state borders of the former Central Asian Soviet republics, the nominal administrative lines separating the republics, became the most important attribute of state sovereignty. The emergence of a new state required republics to have formal territorial frameworks that provided a sufficient level of security throughout the country for sovereignty and regimes on a regular basis. In the 20s and 30s of the twentieth century and in the following years of Soviet rule, national-territorial delimitation did not solve a number of territorial problems in the relations between the Central Asian countries, although they caused conflicts.

Central Asia-China: The Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have also inherited disputed segments on their external borders, particularly on the border with China. Before the collapse of the USSR, there were 25 disputed segments. During the Soviet era, despite many negotiations, the disputed border issue remained. The common border

between the Central Asian republics and China covers 19 disputed areas, which cover an area of about 34,000 km. Since 1992, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been negotiating with China as independent states. As a result, some delimitation agreements were signed between China and the Central Asian republics: Kyrgyzstan and China signed the Kyrgyz and Chinese delimitation documents in 1997 and 1999.

Under the agreements, Kyrgyzstan received 70 percent of the disputed territories and China 30 percent. Similarly, delimitation agreements have been signed between China, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, and the disputed lands have been divided into equal parts. Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China have held multilateral talks on border delimitations, and the Shanghai Five was established in 1996 are the main actions aimed at. Uzbekistan's accession to the organization in 2001 led to its renaming as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Founded on April 26, 1996, the Shanghai Five consists of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan was established to implement such areas as continuous economic and social cooperation. In particular, during its existence, the regional problems between the Central Asian republics, Russia and China have been resolved at a high level. Two of the five Central Asian states, namely Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, have avoided problems related to territorial disputes and resolved the main issue of delimitation. Their land borders with other neighbors in Central Asia, thus making their legal registration complete. Turkmenistan has signed relevant agreements with Uzbekistan (September 2000) and Kazakhstan (July 2001). Kazakhstan addressed this issue by signing agreements with Uzbekistan (September 2002), Kyrgyzstan (December 2001), Kazakhstan, China and Kyrgyzstan (1999), and Turkmenistan (July 2001).

Uzbekistan's border problems with Kyrgyzstan: enclaves and exclaves

In interstate relations on delimitation and demarcation from 1991 to 2001, there were many disputed land plots located on Kazakh, Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and other borders. Although most issues have been resolved so far, some uncertain segments remain.

The process of demarcating and regulating the borders between the post-Soviet Central Asian republics began only in the late 1990s. However, the establishment of national border guards in 1993-1994 and the emergence of new threats to national security, in particular the Taliban, which invaded the southern borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1997, and the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan's raids across Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Intensification and drug trafficking through the region, and the fact that all five or four Central Asian states share a border with Afghanistan have begun to threaten the rapid spread of armed conflict in the region. This was a serious impetus to accelerate the process of building administrative barriers on the new borders of Central Asia. One form of response has been the efforts of countries to strengthen border barriers, immigration controls and full customs clearance and clearance of goods. This sometimes forced unilateral delimitation and demarcation processes. On February 26, 2001, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan adopted a Memorandum on legal regulation of delimitation of state borders. It should be noted that the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border is one of the most controversial in the post-Soviet space. In particular, there are five *enclaves* and *exclaves* between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, four of which belong to Uzbekistan and one to Kyrgyzstan: (Figure 3)

- *Sokh (Uzbekistan)* - Sokh district, part of the territorial structure of Fergana region, was part of the Uzbek SSR from 1942 to 1959, and later was included in the territory of Rishtan district. On February 27, 1990, Sokh district was reorganized. The

administrative center is located in the town of Ravon. Sokh is the largest exclave in the world in terms of population and area. The area is 352 km². The Sokh region has a population of about 80,000. 99% of the population is Tajik, 0.7% Kyrgyz and 0.1% Uzbek and other nationalities.

- *Shohimardon (Uzbekistan)* is an exclave of Fergana Province, part of the Fergana District, which is bordered by the Batken Oblast of Kyrgyzstan. The population is estimated at 5,000 to 10,000. Area 90 km². It is located 17 km from the "main" territory of Uzbekistan. Shahimardon is divided into Southern and Northern parts. The population is predominantly Uzbek and Kyrgyz. According to an agreement reached between the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2007 to promote tourism, citizens of the two countries can stay in the Shahimardon region without a visa for two months.
- *Chongara (Uzbekistan)* - the village was included in the territory of Sokh district in 2018 from the territory of Rishtan district. The village is located on the right bank of the Sokh River. As of 2018, the rural population is around 1,300 people and covers an area of 261 hectares. The majority of the rural population is Uzbek and Kyrgyz.
- *Jangayl (Uzbekistan)* is an exclave located in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan. Its administrative structure is Fergana district. The exclave area is less than a square kilometer. According to some reports, almost no one lives in the exclave.
- *Barak (Kyrgyzstan)* - The village of Barak (exclave) in the Kyrgyz Republic is located in the Kurgantepa district of Andijan region. The area is 230 hectares. The population was more than 600 in 2009, but has been declining in recent years. In 2014, the number of families in Barak was said to be 20. The population is predominantly Kyrgyz and Uzbek.

In 2003, after lengthy negotiations between intergovernmental commissions, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan announced that they had agreed to delimit 654 of the 1,270 km of state border and had no claims against each other. Tashkent used maps of 1927 and 1954 to mark the demarcation line. Because there are so many differences on these maps, it has led to various conflicts between the two countries.

The seriousness of the conflict is that Uzbekistan has mined its own side of the border with Kyrgyzstan. The mines will be located along the entire length of the demarcation line, particularly along the borders of the Sokh and Shokhimardan enclaves in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, as well as in the Fergana Valley.

According to the U.S. State Department, the mined area included densely populated areas. At a special session of the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna on 18 June 2004, Uzbekistan expressed its readiness to consider clearing the border. In July and August 2004, representatives of the Uzbek and Kyrgyz border services held a series of meetings in Haydarkan, Batken (Kyrgyzstan), as well as in Sokh and Quvasoy (Uzbekistan), where technical issues were discussed. As a result, Uzbekistan has begun clearing the area between the Sokh and Shokhimardan enclaves.

An intergovernmental commission on delimitation and demarcation of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz state border was established on August 14, 2014 due to the fact that disputed territories still exist. In the process, it was proposed to leave the southern region of Sokh to Kyrgyzstan and take over

the Barak enclave, but the Kyrgyz side rejected the offer. This situation has caused another tension between the two countries.



Figure 3. Exclusive territories of Uzbekistan in Kyrgyzstan.

The election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the new President of Uzbekistan on December 14, 2016 has led to significant changes in relations with neighbors. The Mirziyoyev administration has made official visits to each neighboring country to restore relations with severely damaged neighbors. During these visits, friendship, economic cooperation agreements and the settlement of border issues that cause disputes between countries were discussed.

On September 5, 2017, one of these visits was made to Kyrgyzstan. Thus, the leaders of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan met in Bishkek to discuss undefined borders and signed agreements to define 85% of these borders.

During this official visit, a total of 12 agreements were signed, including the “Agreement between the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan on the activities of border guards.” On August 1, 2018, with the visit of Prime Minister Abdullah Aripov to Bishkek, new changes took place in resolution.

In particular, projects such as land exchange in enclave and exclave areas were considered and specific decisions were made. In March 2021, Chairman Kamchybek Tashiev held final decisions on demarcation and demarcation which took place on March 24-25 in Tashkent.

As per recent developments in August 2022, following a successful meeting in July in Andijan, Uzbek and Kyrgyz officials gathered in Cholpon-Ata to continue discussions over final demarcation of their border. The two sides began to move toward physically marking the border rather than just drawing lines on a map. In July, they met in Andijan and prepared draft legal and technical documents regulating the process of demarcation. In November 2023, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan inked an agreement covering separate disputed sections of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border spanning 302.29km. The total length of the two countries’ shared border is 1,378km.

Territorial problems of Uzbekistan with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan

The delimitation and demarcation between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were completed in two stages. In the first phase, 96% of the border was delimited. Accordingly, an agreement was signed on November 16, 2001, in Astana by the Presidents of the two countries. As a result of additional contacts in 2002, the border, the Arnasay dam, and other border lines passing through Bagis and Turkistonets settlements were completed. On September 9, 2002, in Astana, the Presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed an agreement 'On some parts of the borders of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.' (Figure 4)

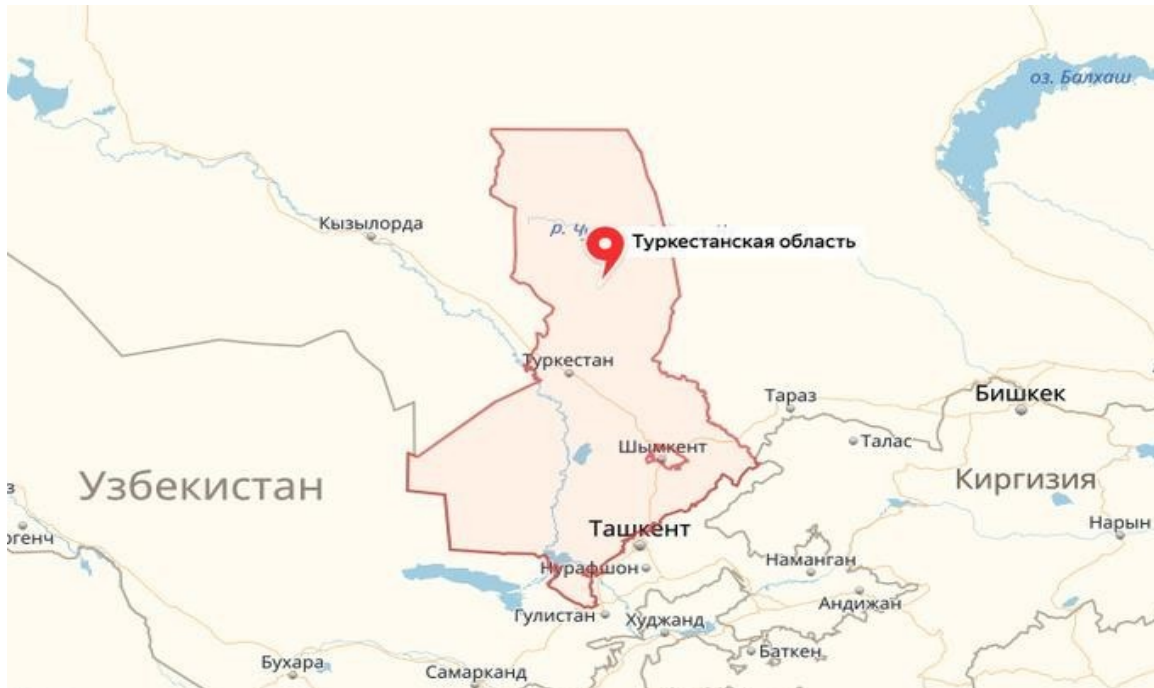


Figure 4. Territorial agreement between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, delimitation of the borders between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan was carried out on the basis of mutually agreed cartographic materials, taking into account normative documents. Thus, the delimitation of all official borders with a total length of 2159 km between the two states has been legally formalized. With the start of negotiations on the demarcation of state borders, the second phase of border regulation, especially on land, has begun. The 2002 delimitation agreement failed to regulate the fate of all border settlements and only resolved some disputed land issues. For example, after lengthy negotiations, the village of Turkistonets in the Turkestan region of Kazakhstan passed to Uzbekistan. Instead, Kazakhstan retained control of the most important reservoir. In early 2003, the governments of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan agreed to redistribute borders. Uzbekistan took over the Park and Turkestan settlements northeast of Tashkent. Kazakhstan is located between the Chardara Reservoir and Lake Arnasay. Kazakhstan's 'enclave' has established direct transport links with the entire country.

Uzbekistan also has territorial disputes with Tajikistan. Of the 1,332 kilometers of the Uzbek-Tajik border, only 93 kilometers remain disputed. Government commissions on delimitation and demarcation of the Uzbek-Tajik border were established in 2000. Since its inception, the Tajik commission has been led by the Secretary of the Security Council, while the Uzbek commission has been led by the First Deputy Prime Minister. By 2002, the parties had

defined 84 percent of the border, and in October of that year, the heads of state signed an agreement on the Tajik-Uzbek state border, which was ratified by both parliaments.

The Treaty came into force after the exchange of ratification documents in March 2009 in Tashkent. However, resolving the remaining 16 percent of the border was suspended until recently. Disputes over this portion of the border line were scheduled to be resolved during talks in February 2012. However, the three-day meeting ended without resolution. On May 30-31, 2017, after almost five years, the Intergovernmental Commission on Delimitation and Demarcation of State Borders held its first meeting in Dushanbe. In January 2018, during a visit by Uzbekistan's Prime Minister Abdullah Aripov to Tajikistan, a new round of talks took place. Abdulla Aripov and Tajik Prime Minister Qohir Rasulzoda chaired both the Tajik-Uzbek intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation and negotiations on delimitation and demarcation of borders. These talks achieved significant progress. As a result, a compromise was reached regarding the disputed Farkhod Hydro Power Plant (HPP), which was built on the border between the two countries during the Soviet era. The dam and its facilities have been disputed areas since independence. According to the agreement, while Tajikistan owns the land on which the facility is located, the station itself, along with its equipment and infrastructure, remains property of Uzbekistan.

Possible solutions to the border problems of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan

Uzbekistan is actively pursuing a policy of good neighborliness with its neighbors. However, a number of problems include four Uzbek exclave areas in the Kyrgyz Republic: Sokh, Shohimardon, Chungara, and Jangil. Territorial conflicts are frequent, especially in the large Sokh and Shohimardon exclaves.

In particular, on May 31, 2020, at the Chashma section of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz state border, an incident took place between residents of the border areas of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. At present, the main issues are transit trade between the two countries, population entry and exit, direct contacts with the Fergana region, and the closure of corridors. Currently, there are two routes from Sokh to Fergana: one via Rishtan and the other via Vadil. (Figure 5) Given this context, let's explore some potential solutions to the border issues:

- Exchange of enclaves with Kyrgyzstan: One of the most convenient solutions to the problem is to optimize boundaries by exchanging enclaves in small areas with each other, as was agreed upon by the governments of India and Bangladesh in 2015. This could involve giving equal amounts of territory to enclaves and exclaves. Especially Chungara and Jangayl. However, two of the four existing enclaves, especially Shahimardon and Sokh, are unlikely to be exchanged due to their size in terms of population and cultural heritage.
- Establishment of a corridor between Sokh and Yaypan: During a visit by Chief Abdulla Aripov to Sokh in August 2020, a proposal was made to connect Sokh district with Yaypan district in Uzbekistan. However, negotiations between the two sides did not yield results until 2001 when an offer was made to Kyrgyzstan for a 17-kilometer-long and 1-kilometer-wide road. The offer was rejected as it would have made parts of Batken and Laylak districts of Batken region a partial exclave for Kyrgyzstan.
- Use of world practice: Exploring how the EU has solved similar problems could help develop new approaches. For example, issues such as water rights, transit, and border crossings were common in the Spanish enclave of Livia in the 20th century.

- Optimization of border controls: Using best practices from around the world could help establish clear times and procedures for inspections at each border post.
- Establishment of bilateral border checkpoints: If possible, joint checkpoints should be set up to jointly control border checkpoints to reduce the number of posts and prevent informal “tributes”. The remaining posts should be canceled.
- Implementation of enclave tourism: Tourist recreation areas, exotic parks, excursions to mountainous areas, hotels, restaurants, golf courses and other service areas could be established. Especially Shahimardon attracts people with its nature, air and location in a mountainous area.
- Promotion of cross-border cooperation: Encouraging cross-border cooperation in areas such as trade, culture, education and healthcare can help build trust between communities on both sides of the border."



The Economist

Figure 5. The route connecting Sox with Yaypan.

Conclusion. In general, the history of the artificial creation of the national Soviet socialist Central Asian republics in the 1920s and 1930s necessitates a careful and critical examination of historical documents on the delimitation of these republics.

This includes materials and documents available in the archives of Central Asian republics (mainly Uzbekistan), Russia, and other countries. The process of national and territorial delimitation has left the newly independent Central Asian republics with numerous challenges, including interstate border disputes. Despite these difficulties, the regional republics have largely managed to resolve delimitation issues on a mutually beneficial basis.

Moreover, it is crucial for these newly independent Central Asian republics to approach the resolution of disputed territories with caution and objectivity, rather than emotion. They must

strive to resolve interstate delimitation problems and conflicts based on mutual benefit and compromise.

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