

PAPER

REFLECTIONS ON THE IDEA OF REDIRECTING SIBERIAN RIVERS' WATER TO CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

Water shortages are currently one of the most pressing issues facing Central Asian countries. This article examines ideas for redirecting excess water from Russia's Siberian rivers to Central Asian countries, as well as the opinions of scientists and experts who oppose such projects.

Key words: Yakov Demchenko, Siberian water resources, irrigation systems, special meeting of the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee, Yury Vinokurov, water exports, Yury Luzhkov, construction of water supply systems, N. Ikramov.

KIRISH

Introduction. Water shortage is the most pressing and serious issue on the agenda of Central Asian countries. Natural population growth and increasing water consumption, the fact that abnormally hot weather is becoming the new norm due to climate change, the reduction in the number of snowy days, and the irrational use of water resources all contribute to this problem. The idea of diverting water from Russian rivers to the Aral Sea is not a new phenomenon, emerging relatively recently. The first plan for this project was developed in 1868 by Yakov Demchenko, a

graduate of Kyiv University, who prepared a plan to divert the Ob and Irtysh rivers to the Aral-Caspian Lowland [1]. The basic concept of the project was to redistribute the flows of the Irtysh, Ob, Tobol, and other rivers to countries experiencing acute water shortages: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The project was first planned and researched in the 1930s and on a larger scale from the 1960s to the early 1980s.

Main part.

To focus our attention on another pressing water resource issue, which has not bypassed the Lower

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Amu Darya basin, we turn to the 1980s, when the crisis in the former Soviet Union was intensifying. It is obvious that at that time, many politicians and economists were reconsidering the idea of diverting some Siberian river waters to Central Asia as a solution to rectify the situation. The fact is that across vast swaths of Siberia, water resources exceed the region's needs by 50 times.

Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s, experts from more than 150 research institutions evaluated 17 options for using portions of the Ob and Irtysh rivers' waters for agriculture in the Kurgan, Orenburg, Tyumen, and Chelyabinsk regions of Russia, as well as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Of the 27.2 cubic kilometers of water diverted by the Ob River, 4.9 cubic kilometers were to be allocated to Russian regions, 3.4 cubic kilometers to northern Kazakhstan, and the remainder to the irrigation systems of the Syr Darya and Amu Darya basins in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. This water was to be delivered through a 2,550-kilometer-long, 200-meter-wide canal with a capacity of 27 cubic kilometers, which would allow for the irrigation of 4.5 million hectares of land (1.5 million hectares in Russia itself).

The project required only 5-7 percent of the average annual water volume discharged by the Ob River into the Arctic Ocean. Construction was expected to cost 32.6 billion rubles, including 13.8 billion for the main water supply network, 11.6 billion for irrigation systems, and 7.2 billion for the construction of new agricultural enterprises that would use this water.[2] It should also be noted that other hidden considerations were also being voiced during this period. Even though the Soviet Union was still in its first stages of collapse, some politicians secretly believed in selling water from Russia to Central Asia. This was explained by the idea that the construction and operation of the canals necessary to extract Siberian resources and money would soon recoup the costs. The Russian government would earn at least \$4.5 billion annually from water exports. This would become an important geopolitical and economic tool (or, more accurately, a cudgel) at a time when water in some areas would be several times more expensive than oil.

Controversy surrounding the project to divert

part of the Irtysh and Ob rivers from Siberia to Central Asia resurfaced in 1983. Academician A. Yablokov, president of the Russian Center for Environmental Policy, stated that such a project would have a negative impact on the environment and the economy. Due to the change in the river's course, floods pose a threat to the environment, creating salt marshes. There is no need to dwell further on the abundance of rivers in Siberia. China has already begun diverting water from the Black Irtysh for irrigation. Its consumption will soon be cut in half. "And now the Irtysh flows into the Ob." [3]

Nevertheless, one should not only focus on highlighting the damage and costs, but also remember the potential benefits and income. The newly irrigated lands would annually produce 17.1 million tons of wheat, 6.7 million tons of vegetables, potatoes, and melons, 2.9 million tons of meat, 10.9 million tons of milk, and 9.2 billion eggs. This would require almost five times the capital investment required to produce the same volume of agricultural produce in other regions, approximately 150 billion rubles.[4] Nonetheless, on August 14, 1986, at a special meeting of the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee, the plan to divert river water from Siberia to Central Asia was halted. There were several reasons why the project was not implemented:

- a) Gorbachev was already in power, and some reforms had begun;
- b) large sums of money had been allocated for military operations in Afghanistan, but there was not enough money to finance such a large-scale project;
- c) considerable numbers of the country's intellectuals, authors, and scientists opposed the initiative; [5]

Under Gorbachev, no one in the USSR could openly oppose various projects, and those deemed contrary to party policy were punished. With Gorbachev's rise to power, significant changes occurred in this regard. He paved the way for increased freedom of speech, and as a result, critics of the project found themselves in the spotlight. Based on research conducted by environmentalists on the project, Yu. A. Yablokov, director of the Siberian Branch of the Institute of Ecology and

Environmental Problems of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Vinokurov[6] and others stated:

- a) if canals and reservoirs are built, environmental damage will be caused and the ecological balance will be disrupted over vast areas;
- b) groundwater levels will rise near canals and reservoirs, seriously threatening roads, settlements, and other infrastructure;
- c) fish stocks in the Ob and Irtysh rivers will decline, affecting the livelihoods of the population in the northern Ob basin, which depends on fishing;
- d) salinity at the mouth of the Ob River into the Arctic Ocean will increase due to a decrease in the volume of water in the river;
- e) climate change will occur, causing significant damage to the region;
- f) groundwater levels will rise in areas around the canal in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, turning the surrounding areas into swamps.

Twenty years later, Moscow Mayor Yakov Luzhkov, in a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin, proposed reconsidering the project's use and the diversion of some of the water from Siberian rivers to Central Asia.[8] He wrote that Russia had lost its sphere of influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. These territories are being bypassed by projects that extract gas and oil underground. "We must be influential in this region. Therefore, we are obliged to provide what others lack. That is, fresh water." [9] Luzhkov's initiative resulted in the spread of material online and the publication of many articles in the media.[10]

After the collapse of the USSR, the government of Kazakhstan negotiated with the Russian side about implementing this previously suspended project in Kazakhstan.

In 2002, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov proposed resuming the project. Luzhkov made another appeal in support of the Siberia-Kazakhstan canal project on July 4, 2009, at the premiere of his book, "Вода и мир" ("Water and Peace"), in Astana.[11]

At a press conference on September 4, 2006, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev stated the need to reconsider the idea of diverting Siberian rivers to Central Asia.

In September 2010, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev ordered the restoration and repair of irrigation systems in Russia that operated

during Soviet rule but were abandoned. President Nazarbayev also implored Medvedev at the time to resume the project to divert water from West Siberian rivers to Kazakhstan, but the Russian leadership ignored his request.[12] Today, the project to divert Siberian rivers to Central Asia is estimated to cost \$40 billion.[13]

Due to growing water shortages in the region, the project to divert part of Siberian rivers to Central Asia is once again on the agenda and the subject of much debate. Its implementation is associated with enormous costs and serious environmental, political, and social risks. According to calculations by scientists from the Russian Academy of Sciences, the project will require at least \$100 billion and will take at least 10 years to complete. The proposed scheme envisions pumping 20 billion cubic meters of water per year through pressure pipelines to fields in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan via the Ob River.

Associate Professor N. Ikramov of the Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers (National Research University) commented on this idea as follows:

"Water so brought along would be, in reality as precious as gold to us. Secondly, the extraction of such a large volume of water into the river stream will have an impact on Siberian ecosystems, i.e., cause alterations in hydrology, imbalance of the water regime, and potentially change micro- and macroclimate in the region. It would be more acceptable to utilize our domestic capacity than spending billions of money on a relatively small quantity of incremental water when taking into account the fact that Uzbekistan is already utilizing an average of 50 billion m³/year of water and more than 30% of this water is wasted because of the current state of irrigation systems. In case the current water resources in our nation are managed in an efficient and reasonable way, the issue of water can be solved to a significant degree, as almost 90 percent of water is used on the agrarian basis. Considering these aspects, he insists that modernization of irrigation structures, making the current use of resources more efficient and enhancing regional cooperation should be in the focus of attention." [14]

At the Seventh Consultative Meeting of the Heads

of State of Central Asia, chaired by President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev on November 16, it was noted that, given the growing urgency of environmental and climate issues and water shortages in the region, the adoption of a "Green Development" concept for Central Asia is essential in the near future. In light of the growing water shortage in the region, it was proposed to implement the 2026–2036 period as a highly practical measure for the rational use of water in Central Asia. It was also noted that it would be useful to actively engage neighboring Afghanistan in a regional dialogue on the shared use of water resources in the Amu Darya basin [15].

Conclusion

Overall, it is technically feasible to redirect the flow of Siberian rivers to Central Asia. However, the project could theoretically be implemented using large pumping stations, long pipelines, and modern water-lifting mechanisms. However, from an environmental, financial, and political perspective, this is practically impossible. In the case of Central Asia, the most sensible and only viable course of action is to utilize available water resources as efficiently as possible, implement water-saving technologies, and strengthen cooperation within the region. Even today, the wisdom of our grandparents, who, among other things, advised drinking little water, even if you live near a river, remains particularly relevant.

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