

Grey-Zone Competition and Border Management in Central Asia: Sino-Russian Rivalry, Fragile Frontiers and the Politics of Ambiguity

Dr. Sonam Singh¹, Dr. Ravi Ahuja²

¹Assistant Professor, PSSCIVE, NCERT

²Associate Professor, PSSCIVE, NCERT

Abstract

Soviet administrators drew the borders that the five post-Soviet republics of Central Asia received at independence, and they did so for ease of administration rather than to mark off separate states. Unmarked lines, enclaves and disputed land and water are the lasting result, and the worst violence came in the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan clashes of April 2021 and September 2022. The paper asks how rivalry between Russia and China in the "grey zone", the area of coercion that falls short of open war, interacts with these unstable frontiers. Russia acts as the region's security guarantor through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and its bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while China has growing economic influence and a security presence in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region that it officially denies. Both are examined here. The method is qualitative, drawing on official statements, scholarship, policy analysis and press reports. The central claim is that unresolved local disputes now meet a loose Sino-Russian division of labour in the management of the region's borders: Moscow provides security guarantees that carry less and less credibility, and Beijing provides infrastructure, credit and a discreet security presence. The border treaty between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (March 2025) and the tri-border agreement concluded with Uzbekistan in Khujand later that month were negotiated mostly without great-power mediation. Even so, dependence on outside powers, open questions of sovereignty and the weak institutions of the CSTO continue to undermine the region's position.

Keywords: Grey-Zone Competition, Central Asia, Border Management, Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Conflict, Collective Security Treaty Organization, Belt and Road Initiative, Gorno-Badakhshan, Ferghana Valley

1. Introduction

When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were left with internal administrative lines that had never been designed as international borders. Drawn by Soviet planners over the 1920s to 1950s, those lines carved the closely interwoven Ferghana Valley into three republics. Almost overnight they turned into state frontiers, bringing with them enclaves, exclaves and wide unmarked areas [1, 2]. Tension along them has at times erupted into armed conflict, the gravest cases being the Kyrgyz-Tajik clashes of April 2021 and September 2022,

which together killed over 150 people. In 2022 alone, roughly 137,000 people were moved out of the Kyrgyz side of the border [3, 4].

Grey-zone competition provides the lens for reading these events. Scholars built the concept chiefly to explain American rivalry with China and Russia, and it describes coercion that is intentionally held under the threshold of conventional war [5, 6]. Applying it to Central Asia is unusual, and the region has seen little such study. The local border clashes were not started by outside powers. Still, Russian and Chinese instruments of influence help define the wider setting in which those disputes are contained, aggravated or resolved.

The study revolves around two questions. The first is how long-running local border disagreements intersect with the broader Russia-China competition for influence in Central Asia. The second question is what we can learn about the limits of great power leverage from the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan resolution process, which was driven almost entirely by local actors. Primary sources include official statements, scholarly literature, policy analysis, and news reports from regional media. Section 2 reviews the literature on the topic, while Section 3 introduces the theoretical framework. Section 4 outlines the major points of contention along the Kyrgyzstan Tajikistan border. Sections 5 and 6 analyze Russian and Chinese policies toward the conflict respectively. Section 7 discusses the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan delimitation and looks at implications for broader geopolitics.

2 Literature Review

The study draws on three bodies of work. The first is the general theory of grey-zone or hybrid competition. For Michael Mazarr (2015), the grey zone lies between peace and war, and states operating there take coercive and frequently deniable steps to alter the status quo while avoiding a military reaction [5]. RAND research that followed identified gradual action, uncertainty about responsibility and a mixing of military and civilian instruments as its usual characteristics [6]. In Asia, applications of the framework have mostly concentrated on the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, and inland Eurasia has been studied much less.

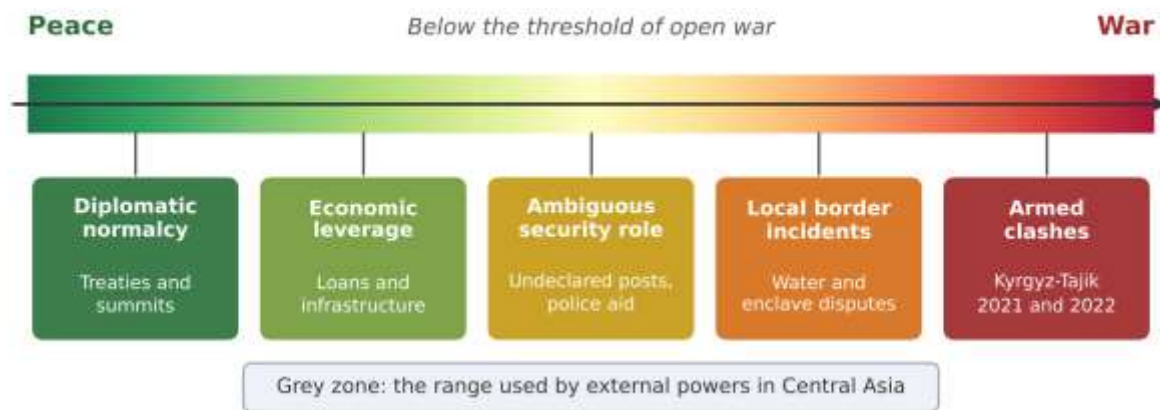
The second body of work addresses borders and security in Central Asia. Madeleine Reeves (2014), who studied the Batken region, and Nick Megoran (2017), who studied the Uzbek-Kyrgyz boundary, are the leading ethnographic voices, showing how people at village level live with and contest borders [1, 2]. Policy analysts have documented a long record of minor conflict in the Ferghana Valley and the weakness of the CSTO, which gave no meaningful response in 2021 or 2022 although both countries were members [7, 8]. A Georgetown Journal of International Affairs assessment described the organisation as a "lifeless, shambling alliance" [9].

A third body of work looks at relations between China and Russia in the region. According to Alexander Cooley (2012), outside great powers in Central Asia must follow "local rules" laid down by regional governments, which set the powers against each other [10]. Recent studies propose that China now outranks Russia as the main economic actor, whereas Russia keeps its advantage in security thanks to older institutions like the CSTO [11]. A division of labour, not open rivalry, is what much of this literature depicts, although some writers question whether the balance can last [11]. By asking how grey-zone dynamics appear in border management, the present paper connects these three strands, a question existing scholarship answers only partly.

3. Conceptual Framework: Grey-Zone Competition and Fragile Borders

Three characteristics usually define grey-zone activity: unconventional means, ambiguous methods and limited aims. The combination allows the stronger actor to keep the initiative while the target lacks a clear justification for a forceful reply [5, 6]. We would add one clarification to your framework when considering its application to Central Asia. In the South China Sea you have a coercing state exercising grey-zone coercion and a coerced state whose sovereignty is disputed, and the two are directly interacting with one another. In Central Asia, however, the most visible border aggression takes place between two regional states who are each, formally, sovereign and also, formally, allies within the CSTO. Russian and Chinese grey-zone activity is applied indirectly. The security environment, the pattern of economic dependence and the credibility of institutions all bear its influence, and local disputes develop within them. Figure 1 arranges these instruments on a spectrum running from peace to war.

Figure 1: The Grey-Zone Spectrum Applied to Central Asian Borders



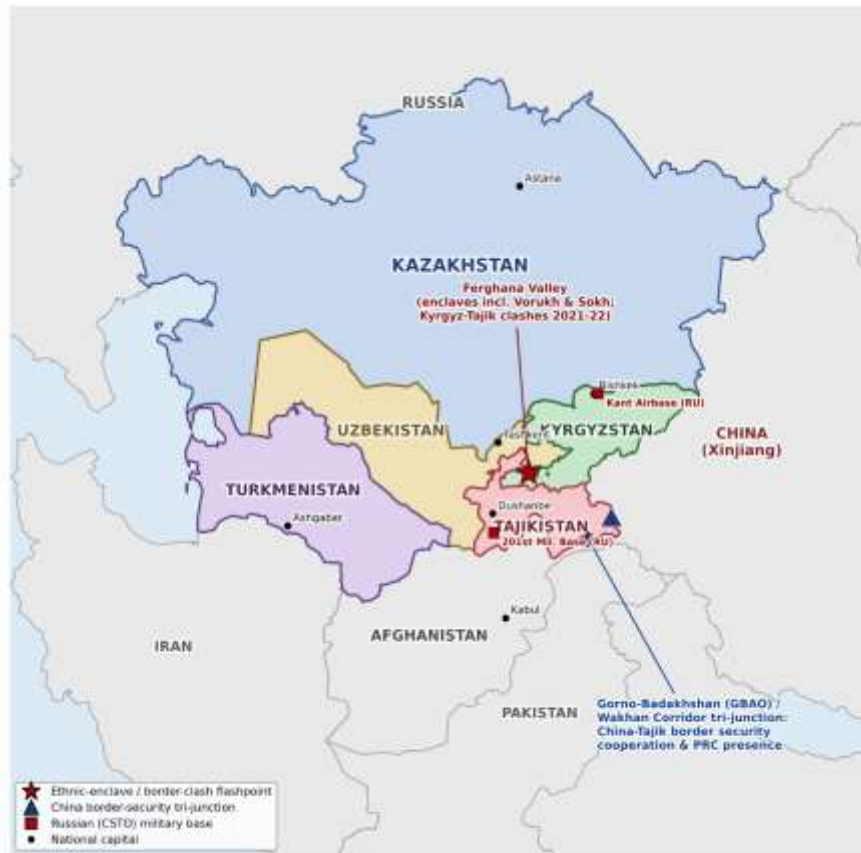
Two findings can be noted from this. On the one hand, local rivalries are long-standing and predate the recent rise of Sino-Russian competition, so great power pressure should be seen as a facilitator rather than a cause: it affects the means, allies and avenues available to local regimes, but it does not initiate most cases. On the other hand, Central Asian states practice what they call "mufti-vector" foreign policies, balancing Russia, China, the West and Gulf states all at once [10]. They therefore have more agency than grey-zone theory tends to allow for weaker powers.

4. Mapping Central Asia's Border Flashpoints

4.1 The Ferghana Valley: Enclaves, Water and Ethnicity

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan share the Ferghana Valley, which many consider Central Asia's most dangerous border area. Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek communities live in close proximity there, and the pattern of ethnic settlement ignores political borders. Enclaves compound the problem, the best-known example being Tajikistan's Vorukh, wholly encircled by Kyrgyz territory [1]. When the republics became independent, around half of the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border had not been demarcated on the ground, and farmers on both sides relied on the Isfara river for irrigation, making access to its water a persistent cause of tension [12]. The main flashpoints and the outside actors involved appear in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Contested Border Zones and External Actors in Central Asia



Uzbekistan went in another direction. Following Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan incursions in 1999 and 2000, its border guards adopted a harsh stance towards people crossing from Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, and sections of the frontier were mined [2]. The situation shifted after Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office as president in 2016, when Uzbekistan adopted a much more cooperative approach to the region. In 2017 it reached agreement with Kyrgyzstan on roughly 1,170 kilometres of their common border, and it subsequently resolved the other sections, including the disputed Kempir-Abad reservoir, through a treaty that took effect in 2023 [13].

4.2 Gorno-Badakhshan and the Wakhan Corridor

The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), at the opposite end of Tajikistan, is a second flashpoint of quite a different kind. Roughly 45 percent of the national territory lies within it, yet it contains only a small proportion of the population. It meets China and Afghanistan's narrow Wakhan Corridor, which itself borders Pakistan-administered Gilgit-Baltistan. GBAO matters, unlike the Ferghana Valley, for reasons other than disputes between neighbouring republics: it hosts China's expanding but officially unacknowledged security presence in Central Asia, covered in Section 6.

5. Russia as Security Guarantor: The CSTO in Decline

Russian influence in Central Asia derives from political, military and cultural links that originate in the Tsarist and Soviet eras. Since independence, the CSTO has been its main vehicle; the organisation developed from the 1992 Collective Security Treaty and acquired formal status in 2002. Russia, Belarus,

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia are the members, although Armenia suspended its participation in 2024 [9]. Russia additionally operates the Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan and the 201st military base in Tajikistan, the two countries involved in the deadliest recent border conflict in the region [7].

Mixed results characterise the CSTO's record. January 2022 saw its largest deployment, when Russian-led forces went to Kazakhstan to help suppress domestic unrest, reacting to internal protest instead of an external threat [9]. The organisation gave no formal response when Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan fought in 2021 [14]. During the more serious fighting of September 2022, the presidents of both countries were attending a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Samarkand, and the CSTO again did not intervene substantively [4]. Because its charter lacks a clear procedure for disputes between two members, it is constrained legally as well as politically [13].

Part of the explanation analysts give for this passivity is Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which has strained Moscow's ability to serve as a regional guarantor, although weapons, training and bases are still provided to Central Asian partners [8]. As for the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan dispute, the CSTO contributed mainly at the diplomatic level, offering mediation and proposing a demilitarised buffer zone, but none of these measures decided the final settlement [8].

6. China's Economic and Security Instruments

6.1 Belt and Road Economic Leverage

Across much of Central Asia, China is now the foremost foreign investor. By 2025, Chinese direct investment in the region totalled about USD 36 billion according to the Eurasian Development Bank, and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan received the most [15]. Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this capital flows mainly into infrastructure, energy, transport and industry, giving Beijing substantial leverage regionally, while Moscow retains the principal position in security and politics [11].

6.2 Ambiguous Security Presence in Gorno-Badakhshan

One of the clearest illustrations of grey-zone ambiguity in this study is China's security presence in Tajikistan. A 2019 Washington Post report established that Chinese personnel, thought to come from the People's Armed Police and not the army, had operated a post since at least 2016 in Tajikistan's Murghab district near the Afghan border [16]. Both Beijing and Dushanbe have denied that it exists [17]. In October 2021 Tajikistan's parliament approved another facility in GBAO, in the village of Vakhon, funded by around USD 10 million from China and intended for the Rapid Reaction Group of the Tajik interior ministry. Notably, the signatories were Tajikistan's Interior Ministry and China's Ministry of Public Security, and not the defence ministries [18].

Choosing this channel is in itself a grey-zone technique. Framing the cooperation as policing and counter-terrorism lets Beijing widen its security reach along a sensitive frontier beside the Wakhan Corridor and Xinjiang, and it avoids the diplomatic and legal price of an openly acknowledged foreign base. Beijing's stated worry is that Uyghur militants it associates with unrest in Xinjiang might use the Wakhan Corridor as a route, and so it has pursued a forward security perimeter in Tajikistan to monitor and block the threat [17]. After the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 this rationale gained strength and led to closer Sino-Tajik security ties, while Beijing at the same time established a working relationship with the new authorities in Kabul [18]. Table 1 sets the two powers' instruments side by side.

Table 1: Russian and Chinese Instruments in Central Asian Border Security

Dimension	Russia	China
Main instruments	CSTO membership, arms supply, military training	Investment and loans under the BRI, police and border cooperation
Physical presence	Acknowledged bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan	Officially denied post in Murghab and a Chinese-funded facility at Vakhon
Institutional channel	Defence ministries and the CSTO	Interior and public security ministries
Main limitation	Declining credibility since 2022 and no procedure for conflict between members	Reliance on deniability and local concern about debt and sovereignty
Role in the 2025 settlement	Offers of mediation, not decisive	No direct role

7. Case Study: The Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border Conflict, 2021-2025

7.1 Escalation in 2021 and 2022

A local dispute over a water intake near the village of Kok-Tash, in Kyrgyzstan's Batken region, was the starting point of the April 2021 clash. Regular army units were soon fighting across about a dozen villages in the Batken and Leilek districts, among them the area around Vorukh. Both sides withdrew their troops in early May, by which point at least 55 people were dead: 36 Kyrgyz and 19 Tajik [3].

September 2022 saw a much more serious escalation. Fighting started at multiple points along the frontier, and Kyrgyz officials reported that Tajik forces had entered Kyrgyz territory with artillery and armoured vehicles. The reported death toll was 63 in Kyrgyzstan and 41 in Tajikistan, comfortably over one hundred in all, and some 137,000 people were evacuated from the Kyrgyz side [4, 19]. That the fighting started while both presidents attended the SCO summit in Samarkand illustrates the distance between regional diplomacy and events on the ground [4]. Table 2 compares the two episodes.

Table 2: The 2021 and 2022 Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border Clashes

Feature	April 2021	September 2022
Trigger	Dispute over a water intake near Kok-Tash	Fighting at several points along the border
Scale	Army units across about a dozen villages	Heavy weapons, artillery and armoured vehicles
Reported deaths	At least 55 (36 Kyrgyz, 19 Tajik)	At least 104 (63 Kyrgyz, 41 Tajik)
Displacement	Thousands evacuated on both sides	About 137,000 evacuated in Kyrgyzstan alone
How it ended	Mutual troop withdrawal in early May	Ceasefire protocol of 19 September 2022

7.2 De-escalation and the 2025 Settlement

On 19 September 2022 the two sides signed a ceasefire and stabilisation protocol. An intensive delimitation and demarcation process followed, headed by the chiefs of their national security services, Kamchybek Tashiev for Kyrgyzstan and Saimumin Yatimov for Tajikistan, and carried out mostly outside the CSTO. It reached its conclusion on 13 March 2025 in Bishkek, where Presidents Sadyr Japarov and Emomali Rahmon signed a treaty covering the entire border of about 1,006 kilometres. Two crossings shut since 2021 reopened that same day [11].

Another agreement followed on 31 March 2025 in the Tajik city of Khujand, where the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed a text fixing the point at which their three borders meet, together with a declaration of friendship [18]. It is notable that the result emerged from direct bilateral and trilateral talks instead of CSTO mediation or arbitration by a great power. Local agency and direct diplomacy were decisive in ending the most serious interstate border conflict in the region, whatever the broader conditions created by Sino-Russian competition.

7.3 A Fragile Peace

Peace on paper doesn't necessarily equal peace on the ground. Drawing a line on a map does not undo the conditions that created previous conflict: competition over scarce water resources, uneven local development, and on-the-ground realities of sharing rivers and roads near enclave populations [19]. The true test of this agreement will be how it is implemented at the local level: whether it fosters trust between border communities and allows for increased economic cooperation.

8. Implications for Grey-Zone Theory and Central Asian Sovereignty

Several lessons for grey-zone theory and for the region's future emerge from the Central Asian case.

- Local conflicts between formally allied states account for the region's most violent border disputes. Outside pressure influences the resources and channels through which they are managed, but it does not generate them, so it works as a conditioning environment and not as a direct cause.
- An alliance designed to deter outside threats may be poorly equipped to handle conflict among its own members, as the CSTO's inaction in 2021 and 2022 demonstrates; its institutional weakness is a vulnerability [9].
- At present Russia and China follow strategies that largely complement each other: Moscow leads on security while Beijing builds economic influence and a quiet paramilitary presence. A growing mismatch between China's economic weight and Russia's security credibility may produce friction later [11].
- Central Asian governments can still handle their own security affairs, as the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan settlement, achieved with little effective outside mediation, shows. This fits the "local rules" that Cooley (2012) describes [10].
- Sovereignty faces a quiet risk of a distinct grey-zone kind in China's denied presence in Gorno-Badakhshan: gradual encroachment through policing and counter-terrorism channels, which outsiders struggle to verify and a host government struggles to resist without jeopardising valuable economic ties.

9. Conclusion

Central Asia's borders are among Eurasia's most fragile. Soviet-style border-making left enclaves, ungarded segments and territorial disputes over water in the Ferghana Valley. Russia focuses on securi

ty but is institutionally declining while China is the economic powerhouse and slowly increasing its security footprint. Their competition is an important backdrop to border politics in the region, though not a determinant of it. The CSTO has repeatedly failed to manage conflict among its members, which reveals the limits of Russia's traditional role. A less visible form of encroachment is represented by China's denied presence in Gorno-Badakhshan, which operates through economic dependence and police cooperation instead of territorial claims.

Yet the March 2025 treaty and the Khujand agreement demonstrate that sustained diplomacy among the most affected parties can deliver real results even where great-power rivalry shapes the environment. Matters well beyond border management will determine whether the peace holds and whether the Sino-Russian balance remains stable, including water sharing, development in border communities and the future of Moscow-Beijing relations. They merit continued study.

10. References

1. M. Reeves, "Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia", Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2014.
2. N. Megoran, "Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary", University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 2017.
3. Vivekananda International Foundation, "Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border Clash: An Analysis", Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi, 2022. <https://www.vifindia.org/print/10729>
4. Meduza, "100 Killed and 137,000 Evacuated", 20 September 2022. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/09/20/100-killed-and-137-000-evacuated>
5. M.J. Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict", Strategic Studies Institute and United States Army War College Press, Carlisle, 2015.
6. L.J. Morris, M.J. Mazarr, J.W. Hornung, S. Pezard, A. Binnendijk, M. Kepe, "Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War", RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2019. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2942.html
7. The Diplomat, "Escalating Conflict on the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border: Whither the Regional Security Order?", September 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/escalating-conflict-on-the-kyrgyz-tajik-border-whither-the-regional-security-order/>
8. The Diplomat, "Central Asia's Strained Security Architecture", April 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/central-asias-strained-security-architecture/>
9. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, "The Collective Security Treaty Organization: A Lifeless, Shambling Alliance", 2024. <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/global-governance/the-collective-security-treaty-organization-a-lifeless-shambling-alliance/>
10. A. Cooley, "Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia", Oxford University Press, New York, 2012.
11. Foreign Policy Research Institute, "China, Russia, and Power Transition in Central Asia", May 2024. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/05/china-russia-and-power-transition-in-central-asia/>
12. EJIL: Talk!, "Small Conflicts with Big Impact: The Tajik-Kyrgyz War No One Talks About", European Journal of International Law blog, 2022. <https://www.ejiltalk.org/small-conflicts-with-big-impact-the-tajik-kyrgyz-war-no-one-talks-about/>

13. Eurasian Research Institute, "Current State of Border Issues in Central Asia", Eurasian Research Institute, Almaty. <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/current-state-of-border-issues-in-central-asia/>
14. Foreign Policy, "Why Russia and China Aren't Intervening in Central Asia", 4 October 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/04/tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-russia-china-intervention-central-asia/>
15. Eurasian Development Bank, "China and the Eurasian Region: Analysis of Investment Flows Based on EDB Monitoring of Mutual Investments", Eurasian Development Bank, Almaty, 2025. <https://eabr.org/en/analytics/special-reports/china-and-the-urasian-region-analysis-of-investment-flows/>
16. G. Shih, "In Central Asia's Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops", The Washington Post, 18 February 2019.
17. Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, "China's Military Base in Tajikistan: What Does It Mean?", 2019. <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13569-chinas-military-base-in-tajikistan-what-does-it-mean>
18. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Tajikistan Approves Construction of New Chinese-Funded Base as Beijing's Security Presence in Central Asia Grows", October 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-approves-chinese-base/31532078.html>
19. Eurasianet, "Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan: The Terror and Death of a Fruitless Border Conflict", 18 September 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-the-terror-and-death-of-a-fruitless-border-conflict>