

Silent Disasters in Forgotten Conflicts

Analysing the Kyrgyz-Tajik Conflict through Geopolitical and Political Ecology Perspectives

DAAN HERREGRAVEN, S1061828		Prof. dr. J.A. Verbeek
Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands		Words: 16,318
Nijmegen School of Management, International Relations		20/06/2024

Abstract

The post-Soviet region is often described as a region of high conflict potential. The number of cross-border conflicts between post-Soviet states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been growing steadily since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This conflict is understudied in the existing academic literature and controversies surround the attempts to explain the underlying causes. This thesis identifies multiple causes and drivers which exacerbate tensions and hinder the restoration of peace, including the competition over natural resources, the legacies of the Soviet Union regarding border demarcation, socio-economic hardships and ethnic differences. This case study uses causal process tracing to analyse the extent to which the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict can be explained from a geopolitical or a political ecology perspective. This thesis finds that the political ecology perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict.

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1. Introduction

The so-called post-Soviet space is often described as a space of entrenched contestations and characterised as a region of high conflict potential, a so-called ‘tinderbox’ (Wittke, 2020). The post-Soviet space encompasses the independent states that emerged after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, conflicts have regularly risen in Central Asia and the number of cross-border clashes between post-Soviet states have been growing steadily (Toktomushev, 2018). These crises are a common denominator of the whole region, paving the way for the eruption of violent conflict. Observers argue that Central Asia’s alleged stability is precarious at best and can vanish in no time as it ‘rests on quicksand’ (Blank, 2012). An imminent risk of longstanding border conflicts escalating into wars is looming (Vennick, 2022).

One of the so-called ‘frozen conflicts’ in the post-Soviet region has reignited into violent confrontations. Long-running Kyrgyz-Tajik border tensions recently escalated into multiple brief but intense border conflicts (Biro, 2023; Deen & Dorst, 2021 & Vennick, 2022). Towards the end of April 2021, skirmishes between local Kyrgyz and Tajik residents ended up being on a different scale of violence when security forces joined in the melee. These security forces allegedly used heavy military equipment and exchanged gunfire and mortars at multiple points along the border, leaving 55 casualties and dozens of injuries on both sides. (Kanayama, 2022 & Sullivan, 2021). Although Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan agreed upon a ceasefire, a series of severe border clashes resumed between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in September 2022 (Vennick, 2022). These most intense clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan since the dissolution of the Soviet Union were depicted almost as an intergovernmental war due to the number of casualties and destruction involved (Baizakova et al., 2023). A shootout between Tajik and Kyrgyz border guards led to a four-day armed conflict and resulted in one of the bloodiest border incidents in recent history. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan deployed military aircrafts, missile systems and armoured vehicles, which caused dozens of casualties and hundreds of injuries (Vennick, 2022).

Although these violent conflicts have profound significance for regional security, many of these events have received barely a mention in international media (Doolotkeldieva & Reeves, 2022). Additionally, the interest of the international community in Central Asia has also decreased significantly over the past decades (Toktomushev, 2018). Central Asia is a critical yet often misunderstood and highly understudied region. This region is even among the most understudied regions in the world (Batsaikhan & Dabrowski, 2017).

This dearth of comprehension is particularly concerning given the lack of evidence-based decision-making in the region. Although evidence-based decision-making is predominantly well established in the developed world, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan do not have the ability and capacity to make well-informed policy decisions. As a result, policy choices are detached from the actual context on the ground, do not address the root causes of the problems and at worst only exacerbate situations. Policy-making derived from quality research and applied analyses is instrumental in producing better policy options. The application of systematic evidence is crucial in order to continually improve policy decisions. However, the institutional capacity to conduct sustained and policy-relevant research is weak across the region due to the overall lack of investment in professional development opportunities for civil servants and researchers. This pervasive capacity gap in public administration and applied research results in ineffective and poor decision-making. Therefore, the Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan governments are incapable of addressing the root causes of conflict such as poverty, ethnic tensions, unemployment, disputed borders and the inefficient use of scarce natural resources (Toktomushev, 2018).

Furthermore, this lack of understanding is also concerning given the region's complex interplay of historical, political, social-economic, ethnic and environmental factors that shape its conflict dynamics. As Central Asia remains an understudied region in the existing academic literature, the causes of conflict and its goals often remain unclear (Abashin, 2018). Controversies surround the attempts to explain the underlying dynamics of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict. The causes of the conflict are not clearly understood and the existing literature points to a variety of potential factors, with no overall consensus on the primary conflict contributors. The conflict is multidimensional in nature and it is not easy to cite the reasons behind this conflict (Borthakur, 2017).

Although existing research on this region is scarce, Toktomushev (2018) identifies multiple causes and drivers which exacerbate tensions and hinder the restoration of peace, including the competition over, scarcity of and inefficient use of natural resources. The theory of geopolitics focuses on the potential for international conflicts resulting from competition over the access to key resources. Natural resources are essential for national survival as these resources enable strong domestic economic growth and powerful militaries. States' search for resource security and strategic advantage has caused many 'resource wars', armed conflicts revolving to a significant degree over the pursuit or possession of critical materials. States that do not have access to natural resources are more likely to be dominated by other nations (Hamilton & Rathbun, 2013). The gain in natural resources and power by one state is

equivalent to the potential loss of natural resources and power for another state. As a result, geopoliticians claim that states pursue expansionist policies designed to control territory and gain access over natural resources. They argue that control over natural resources is one of the key determinants if not the key determinant of wars (Acemoglu et al., 2012).

Political ecologists argue that a geopolitical perspective implies an exclusive analytical focus on resources. Such a narrow approach overlooks the multidimensionality of conflicts and thereby risks oversimplification. Scholars of political ecology also incorporate the interplay of resource-related social processes, including ethnicity and historical contexts. Their analyses focus on local conflicts, contextualised by specific historic contexts and global processes. Political ecologists emphasise the underlying dynamics of specific conflicts by examining the interplay of ethnicity, natural resources and historical contexts (Le Billon, 2007). The political ecology perspective is also reflected in the analysis of Toktomushev (2018), which identifies the unsolved legacies of the Soviet past and the militarization of disputed borders as causes and drivers which exacerbate tensions and hinder the restoration of fragile peace.

In addition, Matveeva (2017) stresses the importance of ethnicity as a cause of conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Although scholarship on the region often tends to downplay the significance of ethnic differences, the factor of ethnicity has grown in significance since early independence of the post-Soviet states according to Matveeva (2017). Ethnic differences have acquired a more negative connotation and local actors increasingly perceive everyday conflicts in ethnic terms. This ethnic polarisation leads to interethnic tensions and conflict.

As aforementioned, the dearth of comprehension regarding the conflict is particularly concerning given the lack of evidence-based and well-informed decision-making in the region. As a result, Kyrgyz and Tajik policy choices are detached from the actual context on the ground, do not address the root causes of the problems and at worst only exacerbate situations. Furthermore, controversies surround the attempts to explain the underlying dynamics of the conflict Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict as the existing literature points to a variety of potential factors, with no overall consensus on the primary conflict contributors. Consequently, the causes of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict often remain unclear. The Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict remains understudied in the existing academic literature and studies that adopt a geopolitical or a political perspective regarding this conflict do not even exist yet. The following research question is derived from these political, theoretical and practical

problems: *"To what extent can the interstate conflict between post-Soviet states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan be explained from a geopolitical or a political ecology perspective?"*

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the understanding of interstate conflicts between post-Soviet states by identifying the underlying dynamics and causes of conflict. The included theoretical approaches will provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and dynamics which are at stake in the post-Soviet region. The comparative approach examines to what extent political ecology and geopolitics independently contribute to explaining the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict.

This thesis is of scientific and theoretical relevance as this thesis contributes to the fields of political ecology and geopolitics by applying these frameworks to an understudied conflict in the Central Asian region. Studies that adopt a geopolitical or a political perspective regarding the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan do not even exist yet, a knowledge gap I seek to address with this thesis. Overall, this thesis advances the existing knowledge on geopolitics and political ecology by applying these approaches to a specific conflict and this thesis enriches the scarce existing academic literature on the understudied region of Central Asia.

Decision-making derived from quality research and applied analyses is essential for improving policy decisions. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan do not have the institutional capacity to conduct sustained and policy-relevant research, which results in ineffective and poor decision-making. This thesis seeks to address this practical, pervasive capacity gap by collecting systematic evidence from the actual context on the ground and conducting research which is necessary for improving policy decisions. This research and applied analysis can be used to make well-informed policy decisions that address the root causes of conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which makes this thesis of practical relevance. Moreover, this research has practical implications for the local communities and states directly affected by the conflict. By providing a deeper understanding of the factors driving the conflict, this analysis can contribute to efforts aimed at fostering cooperation, promoting dialogue and ultimately achieving a peaceful resolution. One of the key conditions for resolving conflicts is understanding the underlying causes of conflict.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. The next chapter provides an overview of the relevant theories derived from the existing literature. This theoretical framework outlines the intellectual context and critical debate surrounding the theoretical approaches. The methodological chapter elaborates on the research design, concentrating on the single case study design and case selection strategy. Additionally, this chapter explains

various methods that were relevant in conducting this research, focusing on the data collection strategy and the data analysis. Chapter four describes the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict itself by providing an overview of the violent confrontations of the past decades. The second part of chapter four analyses the causes of the conflict from a political ecology and geopolitical perspective. Chapter five reflects on the results by drawing conclusions, discusses the limitations of this thesis and concludes with recommendations for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework provides an overview of the existing theories, academic debate, concepts and hypotheses relevant to the research topic. The first part of this chapter gives a general insight into the theory of natural resource scarcity and focuses on the connection between natural resource scarcity and conflict. The second part elaborates on the three main perspectives regarding the theory of geographies of wars, namely geopolitics, political ecology and political economy. Subsequently, the connection between geopolitics and realism is being illustrated. Natural resource scarcity is hereby interpreted from a classical geopolitical and realist perspective and linked to interstate conflict. Furthermore, the geopolitical perspective on 'resource wars' is being criticised from a political ecology perspective. Thereafter, the political ecology perspective is linked to the theory of constructivism. The remainder of the second part tries to bridge the three perspectives on geographies of wars and comes up with a holistic and comprehensive perspective. Finally, this chapter comes up with several hypotheses regarding the aforementioned research question based on the different theories and perspectives.

2.1 Natural Resource Scarcity and Conflict

Natural resources are naturally occurring substances or materials of valuable character. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) describes natural resources as 'stocks of materials that exist in the natural environment that are both scarce and economically useful in production or consumption, either in their raw state or after a minimal amount of processing' (Lauster, Mildner & Wodni, 2011, p. 166). These resources can be used for commercial and industrial use and contribute to economic growth and fiscal revenues. Resources are critical to ensure our well-being and prosperity and contribute to the basic necessities of life. Natural resources can be divided into two main categories, renewable natural resources and depletable natural resources (Lauster, Mildner & Wodni, 2011). Renewable natural resources replenish over time while depletable natural resources are finite and diminish over time as they are being exploited. Renewable natural resources are for example water, forests and land. On the other hand, depletable natural resources are for example minerals, metals, oil and diamonds.

The theory of resource scarcity argues that the scarcity of natural goods is associated with an increased risk of conflict (Vesco et al., 2020). Many researchers have found a positive relation between resource scarcity and conflict (Lauster, Mildner & Wodni, 2011). They argue that depriving people of their livelihoods leaves them no choice apart from fighting for survival. This induces competition and conflict over critical means of existence. Resources

are the second-most frequent conflict item which shows that resource conflicts are a serious phenomenon (Lauster, Mildner & Wodni, 2011). Access to natural resources is increasingly perceived as a major security risk in the twenty-first century as there is a significant potential for conflicts over natural resources to intensify in the coming decades (Lauster, Mildner & Wodni, 2011). Some of these conflicts are extremely violent, while other conflicts are limited to social, political and ethnic tensions.

The origin of these conflicts often lies in the decreasing availability of natural resources in combination with increasing population rates from - for example - the immigration of groups with different ethnic origins. Population growth reduces the availability of natural resources because populations grow faster than resource supplies. Increasing resource scarcity can trigger mass migration and, as a consequence, resource degradation or depletion in other regions (Lauster, Mildner & Wodni, 2011). This increases the population density in other regions where people native to the host region might feel their livelihood is threatened and turn to the use of violence. The degradation and depletion of cropland, forests and water could make these situations even worse. The mismatch between future demand and supply is crystallising into one of the most complex and urgent issues of the twenty-first century. It leads to the scarcity of natural resources and increases the competition over the available resources, with violent (ethnic) conflict as an inevitable consequence (De Bruijn & Van Dijk, 2005).

2.2 Geographies of Wars and Resource Wars

Natural resources have a significant role in studies of geographies of wars. The theory of geography of wars provides an insight into how geographical factors influence the dynamics of conflicts, including resource wars. These so-called resource wars are armed conflicts revolving to a significant degree over the possession of critical materials or over the control over its access and transportation (Le Billon, 2004). The theory of geographies of wars on resource wars can be divided into three main perspectives, the geopolitical, political economy and political ecology perspective (Le Billon, 2007). The next part of this chapter focuses on the interpretation of resource wars from a geopolitical, political ecologist and political economist perspective.

2.2.1 Political Economy and Resource Wars

Political economists identify the economic distribution of conflicts as a political issue and relate it to social power. Political economy perspectives on resource wars stress the

significance of resources in wars which is largely rooted in questions of resource scarcity and dependence. Besides that, resources have an escalating and prolonging effect on armed conflicts according to political economists (Le Billon, 2007) . The access to resources can result in purchasing more arms which can thus lead to the escalation of (violent) conflicts. Furthermore, scarcity often causes economic deprivation and ensuing conflict, especially when institutions prove ineffective.

2.2.2 Geopolitics, Resource Wars and Realism

Classical geopoliticians treat the geographical space as an existential pre-condition for all politics (Wu, 2018). It is a paradigmatic vision of international relations which reflects the permanence and importance of space, resources and power. Scholars of geopolitics try to explain power politics in terms of the physical features of the natural environment. Power is defined by geographic locations, territorial size and material resources.

Classical geopolitical perspectives link the concept of resource wars to interstate conflicts over the supply of strategic resources. Geopolitical strategic thinking about resources focuses on the vulnerability of rising resource dependence and on the potential for international conflicts resulting from competition over the access to key resources. Natural resources have gained a new strategic importance and have been depicted as an important motive of several wars (Le Billon, 2004). In states' search for resource security and strategic advantage, the environmental scarcity of strategic resources has caused many 'resource wars', armed conflicts revolving to a significant degree over the pursuit or possession of critical materials (Le Billon, 2004). Resources have been the focus of interstate rivalry and strategic denial of access. From a classical geopolitical perspective, resource wars are frequently linked to interstate conflicts over the supply of strategic resources. Some even argue that control over natural resources is one of the key determinants of wars (Acemoglu et al., 2012).

Geopolitics is often related to the theory of realism on international relations. International relations scholars such as Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer have relied on the principles of Realism to interpret the history of armed conflict and construct a grand theory of (avoidance of) war (Sharp, 2007). Political realism assumes that states primarily seek security in the international system, because the international political system is anarchic in nature and based on the principle of self-help. There is no higher authority above the state that enforces compliance of rules and there is no certainty regarding intentions and actions of other states. To feel secure, states - especially

major states - seek to maximise their power relative to the power of other states. This competition for power can eventually result in interstate war. A sense of insecurity is ultimately the key cause of interstate war (Barbieri & Reuveny, 2014).

Geopolitics has been present in realist thoughts for centuries and still plays a prominent role in recent realist thinking (Toft, 2005). The importance of scarcity for realism is shown by its connection to the study and practice of geopolitics (Hamilton & Rathbun, 2013). Geopolitics offers a strategic perspective on resource competition. Strategic thinking about resources focuses on the vulnerability arising from resource supply dependence and the potential for international conflicts rising from competition over access to key resources (Le Billon, 2007). Geopoliticians focus their analysis on key strategic resources which can be described as vital global resources essential for the global economy and national security. The acquisition of these resource advantages states in terms of their economic and military power. Examples of such resources are oil, gas, minerals, water and rare earth materials.

In a competitive world, scarcity implies the struggle for limited resources. According to Dannreuther (2013, p. 81), 'the drive to secure access of vital global resources has always been integral to geopolitics'. Natural resources are essential for national survival as these resources enable strong domestic economic growth and powerful militaries. States that do not have access to or control natural resources are more likely to be dominated by other nations (Hamilton & Rathbun, 2013). Geopolitics can be considered as a typical example of a zero-sum game. The gain in natural resources and power by one state is equivalent to the potential loss of natural resources and power for another state. Natural resources attracted by one state are gained at the expense of all other states. As a result, classical geopoliticians claim that states pursue expansionist policies designed to control territory and gain access over natural resources.

Although realist theories possess a great deal of systems-level explanatory power, any theory must incorporate unit-level considerations in order to achieve broader applicability (Sharp, 2007). According to Sharp (2007), foremost among these unit-level variables are natural resources. Natural resources are implicated in interstate war as states' seek for power in the international system requires resources (Morgenthau et al., 2005; Waltz, 1979). Morgenthau (2005) places natural resources at the centre of his conception of national power and argues that national power is increasingly more dependent on raw materials. In the competition over power, states compete over resources deemed crucial for power, including by using force. A sufficient explanation for conflict can be found in a world of scarcity without an overarching authority (Hamilton & Rathbun, 2013). The competition over natural

resources is cross-border (Barbieri & Reuveny, 2014). A decline in resources on the national level is associated with a higher overall propensity to engage in war and thus increases the risk of interstate war (Mearsheimer, 2001). Diminishing resources due to limited stocks and climate-change impacts may increase security concerns and - therefore - the risk of wars in which competition over natural resources becomes the central objective (Lebow, 2010). States particularly compete over cumulative resources, those resources whose control can ease the acquisition and retention of more resources (Van Evera, 2001).

In the past, major international conflicts were fuelled by access to resources (Sharp, 2007). Nowadays, natural resources have exercised an even more impactful influence on the initiation, duration and intensity of interstate conflicts. Rising resource consumption and unpredictable worldwide population growth is liable to exacerbate conflicts throughout the globe as resource-dependent nations become desperate to retain access to foreign-based natural resources.

Geopolitics in general expects that conflicts arise on an interstate level, resulting from competition over the access to key resources. Natural resources are essential for national survival as these resources enable strong domestic economic growth and powerful militaries. Power is defined in terms of a state's geographic location, territorial size and material resources. States that do not have access to natural resources are more likely to be dominated by other nations (Hamilton & Rathbun, 2013). The gain in natural resources and power by one state is equivalent to the potential loss of natural resources and power for another state. States pursue expansionist policies designed to control territory and gain access over natural resources. This competition over the access to key resources eventually leads to interstate conflict.

Classical geopolitical perspectives on the scarcity of natural resources often provide 'realpolitik' assessments of international tensions over the supply of strategic resources (Le Billon, 2007). The geopolitical perspective on resource wars often oversimplify power relations and provide a fertile ground for critical enquiries (Le Billon, 2007). These critical enquiries are often made by political ecologists.

2.2.3 Political Ecology and Causes of Resource Wars

Political ecology has a big focus on conflict. Two thirds of political ecology studies use the term 'conflict' in their analysis and environmental conflict is one of the major areas of political ecology. Political ecology is often even described as 'the study of ecological distribution conflicts'. Although conflict is at the core of many political ecology studies, there

has been limited engagement between political ecology and conflict studies (Duffy & Le Billon, 2018). Scholars of political ecology for a long time rarely examined the exact relationship between the environment and a core concern of traditional political science, namely armed conflict (Le Billon, 2001). Political ecologists often focused on social conflicts over environmental issues, yet neglecting large-scale violent conflict (Le Billon, 2001). Greater connections between political ecology and conflict studies are possible, notably in the light of conflict studies' increased engagement with environment-related conflicts. Furthermore, political ecology's emphasis on uneven power relations resonates with the structural violence approach of conflict studies. Political ecologists primarily focus on understanding conflict, while specifically engaging with the causes and consequences of uneven power relations over natural resources and the environment (Duffy & Le Billon, 2018).

Political ecology is a perspective that draws from political ecology and geography. Its focus lies on the study of ecological-distribution conflicts over the access to and control over natural resources, particularly as a source of livelihoods (Escobar, 2016). The study of political ecology on resource wars focuses on a broader range of resources beyond strategic ones as political ecologists are interested in understanding the complex interaction between human societies and their environments. This includes resources such as land, water, forests and agricultural resources.

Political ecologists argue that water scarcity and water insecurity are not necessarily related to physical water availability. The political ecology approach is concerned with power relations, global-local dynamics and how water scarcity and water insecurity is unevenly distributed within and across communities. It questions the idea that water scarcity is the result of natural conditions and dynamics, such as drought, water overconsumption and climate change. Instead of considering water scarcity as only a natural condition that can be technically resolved, this framework argues that water scarcity is mainly a sociopolitical process that created experiences of scarcity for some people in some places. The study of political ecology is characterised by its profound concern with the effect of power relationships on water scarcity. It focuses on who has the power to use the available water and exclude others. Scholars emphasise the need to study local experiences of water scarcity with an ethnographic eye toward power relations. Structures of marginalisation by ethnicity, identity and origin shape people's differential access to water and health (Beresford et al., 2022).

Political ecologists emphasise the diverse forms of violence at play in resource wars and stress the importance of identities and territorialities (Le Billon, 2007). The term resource wars reduces conflicts to a single factor, while often ignoring other important factors for conflict. Classical geopolitical perspectives on resource wars often imply an exclusive analytical focus on resources and assert a direct link between conflicts and resources. Such a narrow militaristic approach overlooks the multidimensionality of conflicts and thereby risks oversimplification. Furthermore, it misses out on other relevant political dimensions.

Scholars of political ecology on resource wars incorporate the interplay of resource related social processes, including identity and territorialities. Their analyses focus on local conflicts, contextualised by specific histories and global processes. Historical contexts, identities and power relations identify the chronic, multidimensional and multiscale character of many resource-related conflicts, rather than oversimplifying it to just the single factor resources. Chronic violence emphasises the underlying dynamics of specific conflicts, examining the interplay of identities, resources, histories and conflicts.

Political ecologists argue that natural resource scarcity predominantly contributes to diffuse, persistent, subnational violence. Subnational violence often exists or occurs below a national level, often related to specific regions or ethnic groups. By locating conflicts and resources more precisely at the subnational level, analyses more adequately reflect local realities. Subnational violence is fundamental to national violence and therefore plays a crucial role in the occurrence or nature of interstate violence. According to political ecologists, interstate conflict cannot be understood without considering intrastate dynamics. Intrastate dynamics are crucial for explaining interstate conflict.

Political ecology in general expects that conflicts appear on a subnational level. These conflicts are caused by context specific factors and have a multidimensional character. The historical context matters and plays a huge role in the underlying dynamics of conflicts. Conflicts are caused by an interplay of several factors, such as identity and resources.

2.2.4 Social Constructivism and Political Ecology

Social constructivism sees the world and reality as socially constructed. It analyses the effects of ideas, beliefs and dominant discourses on actors' behaviour. Social reality is shaped by actors' interactions, identities, norms, values and their perception of themselves and others in the international system. The way certain actors perceive their relationship with other actors forms the basis of their interactions. Actors behave based on the meaning they attribute to reality. These meanings are created through the interaction between actors. Ideas have a

causal effect, because actors try - through their interactions - to create a common meaning or interpretation of reality. If there is no shared perception, actors differ in their interpretation of reality. Conflictual interpretations of reality often result in tensions, disputes and eventually conflict.

Political ecology and social constructivism are interconnected in how both theories relate environmental issues with social, political and economic factors. The emphasis on dominant discourses by social constructivism aligns with the idea of political ecologists that narratives surrounding environmental issues and conflicts are influenced by power relations. Power relations determine socially constructed dominant discourses. Where social constructivism looks at the importance of narratives and discourse in shaping a conflict, political ecologists study the objective and material impact of these narratives within the existing power structure. Social constructivism and political ecology together provide a holistic view of the environmental, social and political dimensions of conflicts. Environmental conflicts over scarcity of water and land use are socially and politically constructed through narratives by dominant actors (Beresford et al., 2022). Social constructivists emphasise the meaning and importance of certain scarce resources. For certain local communities, water and land are not just economically valuable, but are inherently valuable as well and tied to cultural identities and social practices. Narratives of scarce resources by dominant actors with power can legitimise violent or aggressive behaviour towards 'the other'. These discourses are used to mobilise support and justify certain types of actions.

The theory of social constructivism is extensively used to account for conflict in international relations (Župčević, 2008). Constructivism provides a meaningful understanding of why actors go to war and how they conceptualise violence through reinforcing narratives. A constructivist perspective on international relations interprets violence based on the role of narratives. Reinforcing narratives based on - for example - identity and ethnicity contribute to the beginning and severity of conflicts. Moreover, perceptions of 'the self' and 'the other' and enemy narratives reinforce tensions. Framing a conflict as an existential struggle for survival can intensify conflicts.

2.2.5 Bridging Geographies of Wars Perspectives on Resource Wars

Bridging and renewing the approaches drawn from the geopolitical, political ecology and political economy perspectives on geographies of wars could serve a broader objective and yield yet further insights on so-called resource wars. Engagement between the different

perspectives enhances a broader understanding of conflicts. Reviewing perspectives on resource wars is a precarious exercise and the term 'resource wars' itself is conceptually reductionist, especially when arguments exclusively relate conflicts to resources and take a narrow perspective (Le Billon, 2007).

Classical geopolitical perspectives on resource wars often imply an exclusive analytical focus on resources as the main cause of conflicts. Such a narrow approach overlooks the multidimensionality of conflicts and thereby risks oversimplification. If the geopolitical and political ecology perspectives were bridged, their joint analysis would also incorporate the interplay of resource related processes, including identity, territorialities and specific historical and global processes. This would enhance a more multidimensional and multiscale character of many resource-related conflicts, rather than oversimplifying it to just the single factor resources. In this analysis, resources still play a prominent role as one of the view factors that cause resource-related conflicts.

Political ecologists argue that resource scarcity predominantly contributes to subnational violence that exists or occurs below a national level, often related to specific regions or ethnic groups. By locating conflicts and resources more precisely at the subnational level, political ecologists argue that their analyses more adequately reflect local realities. Political ecologists often ignore the implications of subnational violence related to specific regions or ethnic groups on violence on a national and international level. Violence between ethnic groups residing on different sides of a broader and violence in regions that cover several countries can cause interstate conflicts between countries. By incorporating a geopolitical perspective, subnational violence can be linked to interstate disputes and international conflicts. Local actions and issues can in this way be connected to global processes. This enhances a more holistic understanding of conflicts. Overall, bridging the different geographies of wars perspectives could yield yet further insights on so-called resource wars.

The theory of geographies of wars on resource wars can be divided into three main perspectives, the political economy, geopolitical and political ecology perspective (Le Billon, 2007). The geopolitical approach is often connected to the theory of realism, while the political ecology perspective is often linked to the theory of constructivism. The theoretical framework chapter has extensively elaborated on these perspectives and connected theories. During the next part of this thesis, the geopolitical perspective and the political ecology perspective are used to analyse this specific case of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict. These theories

are used to analyse this case, because they provide a multi-dimensional analysis of the case. This holistic approach combines insights from ecological, geographical, sociological, anthropological and political sciences. Overall, these theories shed light on various aspects of the conflict to provide a comprehensive understanding of the case.

The following chapter on methodology presents the hypotheses derived from theories of geopolitics and political ecology, which are formulated based on the hypothetical causal mechanisms identified through process tracing.

3. Methodology

This methodology chapter elaborates on the research design and various methods that were relevant in conducting this research. The first part of this chapter gives an insight into the research design of this thesis. It reflects on the advantages and shortcomings of a single case study in terms of its analytical depth, validity and generalizability. Moreover, the first part also elaborates on the case selection strategy. The second part of this chapter digs deeper into the research methods that were relevant in conducting this research. This section discusses the case selection strategy, the used data resources and the strategy for the data analysis. Finally, this chapter comes up with an operationalization of the core, relevant concepts.

3.1 Research Design

A research design is a comprehensive blueprint which lays out the research process and outlines how the research study is conducted. It is an overall strategy that integrates the different components of the study in a coherent and logical way. Furthermore, it is a plan that involves a set of decisions on how to conduct the research. The function of a research design is to ensure that the obtained evidence enables a researcher to effectively address the research problem and research question (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018).

3.1.1 Single Case Study

A case study is an in-depth analysis of a real-life phenomenon within its environmental context (Ridder, 2017). Case studies are a qualitative research design in which the researcher conducts an in-depth analysis (Priya, 2021). It provides a better understanding of a phenomenon regarding concrete context-dependent knowledge. Such a case can be an individual, a group, an organisation, a country, a unit, a problem or an event. The contextual and environmental conditions are not delineated or controlled, but part of the research. Case studies provide a detailed description and analysis to gain a better understanding of ‘how’ and ‘why’ things happen, which is the most important advantage of a single case study (Ridder, 2017). Case studies try to extensively describe, understand and explain a research problem and provide an opportunity for the researcher to gain a deep holistic view in the research problem and case (Baskarada, 2014). By looking at deeper causes of a phenomenon, the opportunity arises to open a black box. The in-depth analysis can lead to the identification of general patterns and offers an integrated, holistic comprehension of the case complexity (Ridder, 2017).

Case study research has different objectives in terms of contributing to theory. A case study can serve to advance, develop, extend or test a theory. A single case study can serve as a form of theory testing. According to Ridder, 'If the theory has specified a clear set of propositions and defines the exact conditions within which the theory might explain the phenomena under investigation, a single case study, testing the theory, can confirm or challenge the theory.' (Ridder, 2017, p. 300). The research strategy of this thesis is focused on testing whether the theory holds under this case and related circumstances, context and conditions. This thesis tries to test to what extent the interstate dispute between post-Soviet states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can be explained from a geopolitical and political ecology perspective. This thesis also contributes to the advancement of the theory by addressing its limitations and coming up with recommendations.

The majority of the methodological literature associates quantitative research with generalisation and qualitative research with particularisation (Løkke & Sørensen, 2014). Generalisation is the process of making inferences about a broader population based on the findings from a sample of this population. This is associated with external validity, the extent to which the results of a study can be applied and generalised to a broader set of cases (Baskarada, 2014). Theory testing (which is associated with generalisation purposes) in small-N studies (which is associated with particularisation purposes) are controversial topics in many research communities. This includes theory testing using case studies. On the other hand, controversies surround the extent to which generalisation from case studies is possible. Where some claim that inference is possible, others reject this (Løkke & Sørensen, 2014, p. 70-71). Overall, generalisation involves a judgement of degree whether the findings of a study of a case can be a guide to what occurs in other cases. For a researcher, it is important to be open and transparent about the judgement made regarding the generalisability of the study. Case studies are particularly useful when the phenomenon under investigation is complex. To say something about the generalisability of a case to the wider population, it therefore is important to provide a detailed description of the specific case characteristics and broader population characteristics. In this case, generalisation is only possible to a specific wider population of countries that experienced a similar political transition just like the post-Soviet states did. Furthermore, these countries should also be in conflict with each other over the access to natural resources.

Internal validity refers to the question whether you actually measure what you want to measure. As a case study is in-depth analysis that provides a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, it really measures what you want to measure. To further

increase the internal validity, the researcher must construct and ensure a plausible causal argument that is rigorous enough to support the research results. In this case, the theory of political ecology and the theory of geopolitics provide a strong causal argument why specific factors cause a conflict between the two post-Soviet states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

3.1.2 Case Selection

Typical for single case study research is non-random sampling. The case is often chosen because it is of interest or it is chosen for theoretical reasons (Ridder, 2017). Researchers need to remember that cases are cases of something and that a well-crafted case selection takes into account the universe of possible cases (Klotz, 2008). In this case, the thesis tries to explain an interstate dispute between post-Soviet states from a geopolitical and political ecology perspective. Because of that, the case must be an interstate conflict or dispute between post-Soviet states. The research question *"To what extent can the interstate conflict between post-Soviet states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan be explained from a geopolitical or a political ecology perspective?"* already revealed the chosen case, the interstate conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This case is chosen since it is suitable to discuss and test the theories. Political ecology and geopolitics both focus on explaining resource-related conflicts. The scarcity of, the competition over and inefficient use of natural resources is one of the key drivers which exacerbate tensions and cause conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In addition, subnational violence related to border demarcation and ethnicity plays a crucial role in the outbreak of interstate conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Political ecology argues that subnational violence and intrastate dynamics are crucial for explaining interstate conflict. Overall, the case of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict reflects crucial aspects of both theories, which have the analytical power to explain the conflict.

External validity encompasses the extent to which inferences drawn from this single case study apply to a broader population of cases. When an inference applies to the broader population of a predefined case, the literature refers to this as generalizability. This thesis tries to make inferences based on a single case from a (pre)defined population of cases. Although it is generally impossible to fully approximate or accurately account for external validity in its entirety, scientists need to account for multiple dimensions to make rigorous and credible external validity inferences. Unit-specific external validity inferences are commonly applied in social sciences. This approach tries to determine for which population of units, sample inferences hold. Hereby, the most important step along these lines is to

identify the cases and characteristics of these cases that matter for external validity (Denly et al., 2021).

In this case, the broader population of cases encompasses politically unstable states that experienced a similar political transition just like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The political transition into independent post-Soviet states often involved significant instability, with restructuring challenges, economic turmoil and struggles to establish new political systems. States that experienced a similar political transition are - for example - postcolonial states. Postcolonialism is a term that can be applied to the former Soviet-controlled regions post-1991, including Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The former Soviet Republics were - just like other postcolonialist states - unquestionably subject to often brutal domination. The Soviet Union exerted significant power over these republics through cultural suppression, economic dependence and colonial-like control (Moore, 2006). In addition, the broader population of states consist of resource-rich states whereby multiple actors try to gain control over these natural resources. Overall, inferences from this single case study apply to the broader population of politically unstable and resource-rich states which experienced a similar political transition to independent states and whereby multiple actors try to gain control over the natural resources.

3.2 Research Methods

Research methods are the strategies, processes and techniques utilised in collecting and analysing data regarding a specific research topic. Qualitative research methods are applied to unveil the direct actions and experiences of human beings in a social context. They are aimed at understanding individuals' social reality, including their attitudes, beliefs and motivations. These qualitative research methods often deal with data in the form of words, texts and documents (Kekeya, 2021). The following part of this paragraph is divided into two parts which discuss the data collection strategy and the data analysis method.

3.2.1 Data Collection

Data collection is an important and prominent component of every research, because it supplies the researcher with the appropriate information needed to answer the formulated research question and test the hypothesis (Ordiri, 2019). The information and data used to conduct this research is qualitative in nature and will be gathered through secondary sources of data. Secondary sources of data involve data acquired from optional sources like books, archives, historical data, official statistics, documents, journals, encyclopaedias, reports, etc.

While primary data is information that researchers gather first hand, secondary data has been collected, analysed and published by others rather than directly gathered by the researcher (Rabianski, 2003). The data sources used in this thesis consist of academic journals, books printed in renowned publishing houses, news articles and government publications. The qualitative data will be gathered through an extensive literature review. References to news websites and newspapers are used to describe current events in the conflict. Any other references used for the analysis are academic journals and academic books.

To increase the reliability and validity, this thesis makes use of data triangulation. Data triangulation refers to the use of multiple data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of a phenomena. Data triangulation is a method used to gain multiple perspectives and used to examine the consistency of different data sources (Ordiri, 2019). Data source triangulation increases the trustworthiness of a study by providing substantiated and detailed data not from a single source but from multiple sources in the same study (Kekeya, 2021). According to Moon (2019), 'Triangulation is one method that helps increase the validity, reliability, and legitimation, which encompasses credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, of research findings.'. Data triangulation is a qualitative research strategy to ensure the reliability and validity of data and results through the convergence of information from different sources. The use of data triangulation has many benefits. Additional sources of data often give more insight into a topic and ensure that more comprehensive data is obtained. Furthermore, inadequacies found in one data source are minimised when multiple other data sources confirm the same data. If multiple data sources confirm the same information, inconsistencies are more easily recognized and it is easier to draw conclusions and outcomes (Ordiri, 2019).

Besides data triangulation, this thesis also makes use of theoretical triangulation. Theoretical triangulation is the use of multiple theoretical perspectives to examine, analyse and interpret data and information (Ordiri, 2019). Researchers must use two or more theories to analyse a phenomena and explain the research findings. If the collected data is analysed against multiple theories, a researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). Theoretical triangulation allows for a comprehensive understanding of a complex phenomena, whereby different theories highlight various aspects of certain data and information. Moreover, theoretical triangulation can serve as a means to test the applicability and limitations of certain theories and develop new theoretical insights.

Critics have accused triangulation of being an extreme form of eclecticism (Flick, 2004). Overusing triangulation will not result in gaining a total picture of a phenomena.

Researchers should substantiate the chosen theories and methods carefully and purposefully with the intention of adding breadth and depth to the analysis. In this case, political ecology and geopolitics have been carefully and purposefully chosen as the theoretical perspectives to examine the case. As aforementioned, these theories provide a multi-dimensional analysis and shed light on various aspects of the conflict to provide a comprehensive understanding of the case. This holistic approach combines insights from ecological, geographical, sociological, anthropological and political sciences. These theories reflect crucial aspects of the conflict. The data sources - primarily consisting of academic journals and books - are also carefully and purposely chosen. Academic literature consists of high-quality, credible and reliable information that is crucial for conducting research.

3.2.2 Data Analysis

Process tracing is a fundamental tool of qualitative analysis and methodologists in political science have advocated for causal process tracing as a way of providing evidence for causal mechanisms (Crasnow, 2017). Process tracing can both contribute decisively to describing political and social phenomena and to evaluating causal claims. It is a method used to discover and understand causality through the sequential ordering of causal events and the outcome of interest (Boonstra et al., 2023). It is an analytical tool for drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence, often understood as a part of a temporal sequence of events of phenomena (Collier, 2011, p. 824). As process tracing is often very attentive to the influence of context on the causal process playing out, this method is mostly used for single case studies/within-case analysis (Boonstra et al., 2023). The careful examination of a single case enables process tracing to provide evidence for singular causation. This method gives insight in ‘if’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ something occurred in a specific case. Because of the close engagement with cases and the centrality of fine-grained case knowledge, process tracing can gain insight into underlying causal mechanisms. To make a causal inference, process tracing focuses on adequately describing and unfolding events or situations over time. In order to characterise a process, the descriptive component has a crucial role. Researchers must be able to characterise key steps in the process, which in turn permits good analysis of sequence and allows for causal inferences (Collier, 2011, p. 824). Process tracing enables a researcher to trace the causal mechanism from the cause to the effect. This can be done by starting with the cause and moving to the effect (forward looking) or by starting with the effect and tracing its origin in the cause (backward looking). Process tracing can be used for theory-testing purposes. In this way, the examination of the case

provides evidence that the hypothesised causal mechanism in fact is or is not operating. The intermediate steps in a process are examined to make inferences about hypotheses on how that process took place and whether and how it generated the outcome of interest. A close examination of the intervening activities, events and entities occurring between the purported cause and purported effect can provide evidence for the causal mechanism (Collier, 2011).

Causal process tracing is suitable for this research, because it can both extensively describe political phenomena such as the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict and provide evidence for causal mechanisms. The careful examination of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict through process tracing gives insight into ‘how’ and ‘why’ this conflict took place. Process tracing focuses on adequately describing and unfolding key events and situations over time. The sequential ordering of causal events (the causes of the conflict) and the outcome of interest (the conflict itself) can give insight into underlying causal mechanisms and provide evidence for causal claims. Describing the key components in the process permits good analysis of sequence and allows for causal inferences. In this way, the causal mechanism can be traced from the causes of the conflict to the conflict itself. The thorough sequential ordering of key events in the conflict makes process tracing an appropriate method for exploring the causal mechanisms behind the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict from both geopolitical and political ecology perspectives. This extensive within-case analysis is crucial for understanding complex phenomena such as the Kyrgyz-Tajik interstate conflict.

Considering the research question of this thesis *“To what extent can the interstate conflict between post-Soviet states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan be explained from a geopolitical or a political ecology perspective?”*, geopolitics and political ecology both offer a different hypothesised causal mechanism to account for the outcome. In this case, the outcome or effect is the dispute and conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Although there are some similarities between political ecology and geopolitics, both theories offer a different explanation and causal mechanism to account for the outcome.

Geopoliticians imply that conflicts are inherently associated with the distribution of resources. The competition over scarce resources is a fundamental cause of conflict. Geopolitics in general expects that conflicts arise on an interstate level, resulting from interstate competition over the access to key resources. Natural resources are essential for national survival as these resources enable strong economies and powerful militaries. Geopoliticians expect that the competition over natural resources is a zero-sum game which implies that the gain in natural resources and power by one state is equivalent to the potential loss of natural resources and power for another state. States pursue expansionist policies

designed to control territory and gain access over crucial natural resources. This competition over the access to key resources eventually leads to interstate conflict.

The geopolitical, hypothetical causal mechanism on the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan expects that the initial reason for the outbreak of conflict is the collapse and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet era, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan belonged to the same unitary Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. There was intensive cooperation within the Soviet Union and the Soviet Republics shared their natural resources. The political transition from Soviet Republics into independent states is the starting point for the interstate competition over crucial and scarce natural resources. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, independent Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had - according to geopolitics - to compete for vital natural resources to enable strong economies and powerful militaries. Geopolitics considers the competition over natural resources between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as a zero-sum game which implies that the gain in natural resources and power by one state is equivalent to the potential loss of natural resources and power for another state and vice versa. Geopolitics argues that this competition between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for national survival and access to key resources eventually caused interstate conflict. Based on this hypothetical causal mechanism, the following hypothesis can be derived:

H1: "If local cross-border violence related to competition over scarce natural resources, ethnicity and border disputes is present, the likelihood of an interstate conflict breaking out increases."

Political ecology argues that interstate conflict cannot be understood without taking into account intrastate dynamics. Subnational and local cross-border violence is fundamental to and causes interstate conflict. This type of violence is often related to specific regions or ethnic groups. Political ecology offers a multidimensional perspective by emphasising the underlying dynamics of conflicts, focusing on the interplay between ethnicities, resources and historical contexts. Their analyses focus on local conflicts, contextualised by specific historical contexts and global processes.

The political ecology, hypothetical causal mechanism on the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan expects that subnational and local cross-border violence is fundamental to this interstate conflict. According to political ecologists, the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union has led to local cross-border and subnational violence between Kyrgyz and Tajik border communities over the access to scarce natural resources, ethnicities and disputed borders. Political ecology implies that the escalation of local cross-border violence results in the involvement of national governments and armies. The

involvement of the Kyrgyz and Tajik military in local cross-border conflicts eventually caused an interstate conflict between the two independent states. Based on this hypothetical causal mechanism, the following hypothesis can be derived:

H2: If local cross-border and subnational violence related to natural resources, ethnicity and disputed borders is present, the likelihood of an interstate conflict breaking out increases.

3.3 Operationalisation

Operationalisation refers to the process of defining abstract concepts or variables. This process turns abstract concepts into concrete and measurable indicators that can be analysed in the empirical chapter. The operationalisation of key concepts is crucial because it allows researchers to define concepts clearly, measure specific variables and test hypotheses empirically. In addition, the operationalisation of core concepts makes it possible for other authors to replicate this study.

Natural resources are a core concept in this research. Natural resources are stocks of materials that exist in the natural environment that are both scarce and economically useful in production or consumption, either in their raw state or after a minimal amount of processing (Lauster, Mildner & Wodni, 2011, p. 166). Natural resources can be divided into two main categories, renewable natural resources and depletable natural resources (Lauster, Mildner & Wodni, 2011). Renewable natural resources replenish over time while depletable natural resources are finite and diminish over time as they are being exploited. Renewable natural resources are for example water, forests and land. On the other hand, depletable natural resources are for example minerals, metals, oil and diamonds. In this thesis, the natural resources relevant for the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict are water, pasture grounds and arable land. The theory of resource scarcity argues that the scarcity of natural goods is associated with an increased risk of conflict (Vesco et al., 2020). Many researchers have found a positive relation between resource scarcity and conflict (Lauster, Mildner & Wodni, 2011). Access to natural resources is increasingly perceived as a major security risk in the twenty-first century as there is a significant potential for conflicts over natural resources to intensify in the coming decades (Lauster, Mildner & Wodni, 2011). Such conflicts over natural resources are called ‘resource wars’, armed conflicts revolving to a significant degree over the pursuit or possession of critical materials (Hamilton & Rathbun, 2013).

Another key variable in this research is interstate conflict. Interstate conflict is the dependent variable included in the hypotheses. Interstate conflict refers to violent or

non-violent disputes, tensions or confrontations between two or more independent and sovereign states (Hensel, 1998). The operational definition of interstate conflict can be qualitatively analysed by assessing the severity and impact of the interstate conflict, focusing on casualties, injuries and infrastructural damages (Reeder, 2014). Interstate conflict is an abstract variable that is divided into five dimensions. These components consist of military actions, economic actions, diplomatic actions, political actions and territorial disputes. The dimensions derived from the variable are furthermore divided into measurable indicators. Table one presents an overview of how the interstate conflict concept is operationalised.

Table 1: Operationalization of the variable ‘Interstate conflict’

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Way of measuring
Interstate conflict	Military	Military confrontations	Count the amount of battles and violent skirmishes between states
		Military expenditure	Analyse the defence spending by the involved states
		Military damage	Count the number of casualties and injuries and assess the infrastructural damage resulting from military action
	Economic	Economic sanctions	Analyse the number and type of trade restrictions such as imposed trade barriers.
		Blocking access to vital economic resources	Count the amount of blockages of vital economic resources such as water and electricity
	Diplomatic	Expulsions of diplomats	Count the amount of foreign diplomats being expelled from a country
		Diplomatic protests	Count the amount of formal complaints filed to international bodies and other states
	Political	Legislative measures	Analyse the number of policies, measures and laws enacted by a government in response to the conflict
		Official statements	Analyse the frequency and content of official government statements regarding the conflict
		Bilateral negotiations	Assess the instances and outcomes of negotiations between the involved states
	Territorial	Border confrontations	Count the number of reported border incidents and border disputes.
		Formal claims and legal cases over territories	Formal claims and legal disputes over territories submitted to and in international courts

Local cross-border violence is the remaining crucial concept derived from the hypotheses. Local cross-border violence refers to low-level violence on a local scale that spills over across national borders. This often occurs near international borders between border communities residing in neighbouring countries. Local cross-border violence can have profound implications for broader stability in a region. Prolonged cross-border tensions have the potential to escalate in larger conflicts if not addressed. Table two presents an overview of how the local cross-border conflict concept is operationalised.

Table 2: Operationalization of the variable ‘Local cross-border conflict’

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Way of measuring
Local cross-border conflicts	Economic	Blockage of vital economic resources	Count the amount of blockages of vital economic resources such as water and electricity
		Disruption of economic cooperation	Count the instances where economic cooperation agreements or projects are disrupted due to conflict
	Political	Involvement of local authorities	Count the amount of incidents that involved local security forces, border guards and law enforcers
	Territorial	Border disputes	Count the number of reported border skirmishes, incidents and confrontations
	Ethnic	Ethnic violence	Assess the ethnic composition of border communities involved in the conflict and count the incidents of violence targeting ethnic groups across the border

The following part of this thesis is structured as follows. I conduct this research by first describing the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and understanding the conditions that created the potential for conflict in chapter four. Next, I describe to what extent the theories of geopolitics and political ecology can help us understand the causes of the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict in chapter five.

4. Analysis

This chapter provides a deep analysis of the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The first part of this chapter gives an insight into the conflict itself by providing an overview of the violent confrontations of the past decades. The second part of this chapter elaborates on the causes of the Tajik-Kyrgyz conflict, focusing on the Soviet Union legacy regarding border demarcation, scarce natural resources, ethnicity and socio-economic factors. The final part of this chapter reflects on the results derived from this analysis.

4.1 The Tajik-Kyrgyz conflict

The so-called post-Soviet space is often described as a space of entrenched contestations and characterised as a region of high conflict potential, a so-called ‘tinderbox’ (Wittke, 2020). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, conflicts have regularly risen in Central Asia and the number of cross-border clashes between post-Soviet states have been growing steadily (Toktomushev, 2018). Although many of these events have received barely a mention in international media, they have profound significance for regional security (Doolotkeldieva & Reeves, 2022). These crises are a common denominator of the whole region, paving the way for the eruption of conflict. An imminent risk of longstanding border conflicts escalating into wars is looming (Vennick, 2022).

One of the so-called ‘frozen conflicts’ in the post-Soviet region is the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Long-running Kyrgyz-Tajik border tensions escalated into multiple brief but intense border conflicts since the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Biro, 2023; Deen & Dorst, 2021; Vennick, 2022). Between 2004 and 2015, over 70 clashes related to persistent low-level conflict between local communities occurred on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border (Sullivan, 2021). Local media reported that in 2004, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014 more than 70 incidents took place in the border areas. Additionally, the Batken and Sughd provinces have been marred by conflicts in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2015 (Toktomushev, 2017).

In 2004, the ‘Apricot War’ took place over the planting of apricot trees by Tajik farmers in disputed areas (Kurmanalieva, 2018 & Sullivan, 2021). Clashes arose when Kyrgyz inhabitants disputed and removed all those trees. Confrontations between border guards and residents in 2005 over disputed territory were caused by unresolved border demarcation. The 2008 confrontations were primarily related to access to infrastructure, as Tajik and Kyrgyz civilians interrupted water irrigation channels and blocked roads. 63 incidents on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border were reported in the period from 2011 to 2013, ranging

from small fights to hostage taking (Toktomushev, 2017). Aforementioned skirmishes are often called ‘Ketmen Wars’ as they were generally limited in scope and conducted for the most part with agricultural weapons (Sullivan, 2021). These escalations between border communities usually involved arson, stone-throwing and the usage of garden tools (Kurmanalieva, 2018 & Toktomushev, 2017).

The conflict that took place in January 2014 was marked by a new dynamic (Kurmanalieva, 2018 & Toktomushev, 2017). Whereby previous ‘Ketmen Wars’ involved civilians equipped with stones and garden tools, this conflict involved regular army units from both countries who allegedly used heavy weapons such as mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. During a tense standoff, Kyrgyz and Tajik border guards fired shots and injured five Kyrgyz soldiers and three Tajik soldiers. The menacing trend of rising violence prompted the governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to sit down at the negotiating table and devise solutions addressing the root causes of these problems. Despite these inter-governmental efforts to mitigate tensions, incidents of sporadic violence and escalations did not diminish (Toktomushev, 2017). In May 2014, violent struggles involving nearly 1,500 local civilians broke out on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, leaving several people injured in addition to burned out cars and a gas station (Kurmanalieva, 2018 & Toktomushev, 2017).

The conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has recently reignited into violent confrontations. Towards the end of April 2021, skirmishes between local Kyrgyz and Tajik residents around the Golovnoy water supply facility in the Batken Region ended up being on a different scale of violence. Stone-throwing between civilians escalated quickly when security forces joined in the melee. These security forces allegedly used heavy military equipment and exchanged gunfire and mortars at multiple points along the border, leaving 55 casualties and dozens of injuries on both sides. Respectively, 36 and 19 Kyrgyz and Tajik citizens were killed. Although Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan agreed upon a ceasefire, tens of thousands civilians were evacuated. The same ceasefire was later on violated multiple times in May and July, which resulted in the death of one Kyrgyz border guard (Kanayama, 2022 & Sullivan, 2021).

Series of severe border clashes resumed between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in September 2022 (Vennick, 2022). These most intense clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan since the dissolution of the Soviet Union were depicted almost as an intergovernmental war due to the number of casualties and destruction involved (Baizakova et al., 2023). The conflict was initially caused by the killing of two Tajik border guards during a shooting between border guards from both countries. This shootout led to a four-day

armed conflict and resulted in one of the bloodiest border incidents in recent history. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan deployed military aircrafts, missile systems and armoured vehicles, which caused dozens of casualties and hundreds of injuries (Vennick, 2022). Kyrgyzstan reported a mass evacuation whereby more than 100,000 Kyrgyz civilians were displaced by the escalating violence. Furthermore, hundreds of buildings, cars and important infrastructure objects like hospitals and schools were destroyed ((Baizakova et al., 2023). Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan accuse each other of igniting the conflict. According to the Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kyrgyzstan initiated the outbreak of violence by arresting numerous ethnic Tajiks prior to the conflict (Vennick, 2022). On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan claimed that Tajikistan initiated the conflict by entering Kyrgyz territory using tanks and armoured vehicles.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are currently engaging in an arms race in Central Asia which exacerbates tensions. Both countries are currently increasing their military and security spending on their borders, including purchasing unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) technology from Iran and Bayraktar TB2 drones from Turkey (Pantucci, 2024). Security through the militarization of borders has transformed the nature of relations in the region and rather contributes to instability instead of strengthening fragile peace. A stricter border regime in Central Asia with the involvement of border guards and the use of military hardware does not embody more peace, but rather escalates the conflict to a completely new level and extent that no one could have considered plausible (Toktomushev, 2018). There looms an imminent risk of longstanding border conflicts escalating into a war (Vennick, 2022).

4.2 The Soviet Union Legacy

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the independent Central Asian states, among them Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, were established. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in the beginning of 1991 resulted in significant political and socio-economic changes for both the independent Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Kurmanalieva, 2018). During the time of the Soviet Union, any frontier demarcations were of a symbolic character (Sullivan, 2021). The Soviet authorities are often accused of intentionally complicating these borders as part of a ‘divide-and-conquer’ strategy (Deen & Drost, 2021).

The transition from Soviet Republics to independent states made this problem a live issue (Sullivan, 2021). The once open and almost invisible borders became now international frontiers (Akiner, 2016). During negotiations regarding border demarcation, difficulties were encountered because the border between the member republics drawn in Soviet times had a

symbolic character. These issues are even further complicated by the presence of a number of sovereign enclaves across the borders, again relics from earlier Soviet demarcation. The Ferghana Valley consists of several enclaves, including the two Tajik exclaves Vorukh and Kayragach over the Kyrgyzstan border (Kurmanalieva, 2018). Creating enclaves was an intended plan to divide the land in a way that would undermine earlier political structures, thus making the Soviet republics more dependent on Moscow's decisions (Borthakur, 2017). The artificial delineation of the borders in the Ferghana Valley during the Soviet era is one of the main reasons behind the occurrence of various conflicts in the valley, especially after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Ill-defined border and the problems of enclaves and exclaves have made the Ferghana Valley one of the most dangerous and unstable regions in the world.

Despite long-term ongoing talks on border demarcation, many issues have not yet been resolved. The boundaries drawn during the time of the Soviet Union have not been universally accepted by the modern post-Soviet states and have thus become the subject of fierce debate since their independence (Karinbayev, 2020). Although many official bilateral meetings were held, the issue of demarcation and delimitation of the Kyrgyz-tajik borders has been ongoing for more than 20 years. Nowadays, the Kyrgyz state commission on border issues and the Tajik state commission of demarcation and delimitation of state borders still do not agree on the normative and legal aspects of the border issue. The authorities of the two republics are using different geopolitical maps and do not agree on the use of corresponding documents. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have avowed the disputed territories neutral until mutual decisions have been found (Kurmanalieva, 2018).

4.3 Natural Resources and Conflict

The Ferghana Valley is one of the main agricultural regions and most densely populated areas of Central Asia (Artem, 2007 & Borthakur, 2017). The almond shaped intramontane basin surrounded by extensive mountain ranges is one of the most hospitable areas to irrigated agriculture (Bichsel, 2012). The valley is home to the most desirable agricultural land and climate in all Central Asia. The numerous rivers descending from the surrounding Tian Shan mountains irrigate an almost unbroken chain of fertile oases. Water irrigation systems have transformed the dry zones of the valley into a large cotton industry. This region is a large wheat, fruit and raw silk producer thanks to the Naryn and Kara Darya rivers that come together in the Ferghana valley and form the Syr Darya river. The Ferghana Valley is covered

with orchids, vineyards, walnut trees and mulberry tree gardens. Many other agricultural products are grown on the local level to fulfil regional demand such as maize, mungbean, buckwheat, common bean, groundnut, corn, sesame, soybean, tobacco, vegetables and many more (Kurt, 2022).

Nowadays, the economic situation in the valley is characterised by the acute shortage of resources (Artem, 2007). The exceptional population growth and density exacerbate tensions and intensify the competition for control over scarce natural resources, particularly over pasture and water resources (Borthakur, 2017). The scarcity of natural resources is a structural cause of conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the Ferghana Valley.

4.3.1 Pasture Resource Conflicts

Historically, Tajik inhabitants had a sedentary way of life and kept small numbers of livestock at their households. These small numbers of livestock - consisting of one or two cows and three or four small animals - were kept to provide dairy products and other animal-based products for their own livelihood. On the other hand, Kyrgyz inhabitants were nomads and travelled between seasonal pastures at different altitudes for grazing at different times of the year. Their livestock contributed to a large extent to their household income (Kurmanalieva, 2018).

After the formation of the Soviet Union, the Soviet regime insisted on a forced sedentarization of the rural Kyrgyz and Tajik population. Kyrgyz and Tajik farmers were forced to work for state farms (sovkhozy) and collective farms (kolkhozy) and their livestock were redistributed over these farms. During this time, the Tajik farmers depended on the pasture resources located in the Kyrgyz territory since the Tajik livestock in the border region has limited rangelands. This pasture management was under Soviet control and the sharing of pasture resources was based on agreements between Kyrgyz and Tajik kolkhozes. After the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan became independent states and dramatic changes occurred regarding pasture management systems. Collective and state farms were dissolved and the Soviet pasture management agreements became invalid (Kurmanalieva, 2018).

The lack of international agreements on pasture management and the absence of official border delimitation and demarcation creates a situation whereby the border communities are uncertain about the legal access to and use of pasture resources. Nowadays, pasture resources are getting scarcer every year due to population increases as well as limited productivity caused by climatic conditions of the rangelands. On the other hand, livestock

production is a fundamental component of the Tajik and Kyrgyz economies. The number of livestock is increasing at an astonishing rate, especially in the border areas. This results in an increasing demand for pasture use every year (Kurmanalieva, 2018).

Conflicts regarding pasture resources mainly arise in border regions. Since there are limited rangelands on the territory of Tajikistan in the border region available, Tajik herders and farmers directly depend on Kyrgyz pasture resources. Tajik rural communities let their livestock graze on pastures belonging to Kyrgyz territory. Due to limited pasture resources, the current Kyrgyz Pasture law prohibits foreign herders from grazing on Kyrgyz pastures. Sequentially, Kyrgyz rural communities chase Tajik herders away whenever they see them grazing on the pastures in Kyrgyz territory. However, Tajik herders do not consider themselves as foreigners, since these pasture resources were used by their ancestors during the times of the Soviet Union. Some Tajik herders even claim that parts of these border grazing areas belong to Tajikistan. These conflicts become even more complicated, because Kyrgyz and Tajik border communities are lacking information on where the disputed areas are located. This is caused by the absence of international agreements and official border demarcation (Kurmanalieva, 2018).

Similar conflicts arise when Kyrgyz border guards confiscate livestock of Tajik herders grazing on Kyrgyz pastures. Tajik herders have to pay a fee to these border guards in order to release their livestock, which fuels the conflict in border areas. This is not an official procedure under the current Kyrgyz Pasture Law and it is even considered illegal (Kurmanalieva, 2018).

4.3.2 Water Resource Conflicts

The water conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan primarily revolves around the absolute shortage, use and management of water resources in the Ferghana Valley. This fertile and densely populated region is crucial for agriculture, which is highly dependent on water from channels, rivers and reservoirs. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan heavily rely on water for irrigation to support their predominantly agricultural economies.

The scarcity of water resources and the absolute shortage of available water is one of the factors which exacerbate tensions and causes conflict. These water shortages are often caused by population growth and climate change. The increase in the temperature level, the overall decreasing rate of rainfall and the increased frequency of extreme weather events such as droughts reduce the predictability of water supply, disrupts water availability and therefore aggravates the tension over water supplies. Moreover, accelerated glacial melt in the Tien

Shan and Pamir mountain ranges threatens long-term water availability as glaciers shrink. This shows that water shortage is very much evident, not to mention the population increase (Borthakur, 2017). Compared to 2000, the population in the Ferghana Valley is expected to double by 2050. Due to the rapid population growth, the demand for water continues to significantly increase over time (Venera, 2013).

After the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union, the collective and state farms were dissolved. The use of water resources increased as many small-scale peasant farms were created in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Farmers in the border region often suffer from a lack of water during irrigation periods from April to June, which causes constant conflict between border communities (Kurmanalieva, 2018). Both countries share many water resources, including 40 channels and two rivers. These channels often rise in Kyrgyzstan and flow to Tajikistan and vice versa. Many Kyrgyz farmers complain that Tajik communities upstream of the river use too much water and less remains for the farmers downstream. At the same time, Tajik communities that live further downstream complain about too little water arriving in their territories (Kurmanalieva, 2018). The flow patterns of the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers are crucial for the downstream and upstream users as these rivers are the main source of water. The Syr Darya river rises in the Tian Shan mountains and flows through the Ferghana Valley. The artificial boundaries created during the time of the Soviet Union do not take into account the flow of the river and developments in the course, and disputes over water rights and management often spill over into conflict between cross-border communities (Borthakur, 2017). Bichsel (2009) identifies upstream-downstream geographic positions as the determining power relations in these irrigation conflicts. Water resource allocation creates tensions when the Kyrgyz living upstream have better access to water while downstream Tajiks do not receive enough (Bichsel, 2009). Kyrgyzstan controls several water reservoirs and has the power to regulate the water flow. The construction of huge reservoirs and dams has been criticised as downstream countries receive less water than they require for their agricultural production. Kyrgyzstan is dependent on its hydro-power resources and therefore wants to build massive dams to meet its energy needs (Borthakur, 2017).

Both countries use water resources as a strategic instrument to put pressure on each other by blocking each other's access to water (Kurmanalieva, 2018). This tactic is often used during critical periods when the water demand is at its highest, for example during growing seasons. Border communities block water channels to each other which raises the potential

for violent conflict, specifically surrounding the disputed Golovnoy water distribution point (Deen & Drost, 2021).

Some scholars argue that water scarcity in Central Asia is rather defined by water resource management than by its real amount. Since the budgets for water infrastructure and water management of both governments have fallen dramatically, water infrastructure has only deteriorated further and has fallen into a state of disrepair (Toktomushev, 2018). Irrigation channels are in poor state, water channels are either silted up or damaged and water pumps are broken or not working at full capacity (Toktomushev, 2018). This leads to further water losses. An example of such a festering issue is the The Shurab–Vorukh drinking water pipeline. Although some repairs are occasionally conducted to cover up the cracks, their scale is insufficient to resolve the problem (Matveeva, 2017). Complex hydraulic infrastructure systems inherited from the Soviet Union assumed cooperation between the upstream and downstream states. The cooperative expectations quite often do not match the reality at inter-state level. Since hydraulic infrastructure is transboundary in nature, there is no dedicated party responsible for its rehabilitation and maintenance. Neither Kyrgyzstan nor Tajikistan is willing to invest in water systems beyond its own national borders (Toktomushev, 2018). Furthermore, neither of these countries want to invest in reparations due to a lack of precise mechanisms of transboundary water management. As a result, a lot of water is unavailable for agricultural use since there is no special organisation, no agreement and law on that issue (Kurmanalieva, 2018).

4.4 Ethnic Conflicts

The Ferghana Valley is an ethnically and culturally complex region divided among three post-Soviet Republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. This densely populated area with a population of nearly twelve million accounts for approximately one-third of the total population of Tajikistan and of Kyrgyzstan. Since the valley is split among ethnic Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Tajiks, each of the three independent countries contain significant minorities of the other two ethnic groups. Moreover, a substantial population of Russians, Crimean Tatars, Slavs, Armenians and Meskhetian Turks live in this region. As the border between the three Central Asian Republics is not scientifically demarcated according to ethnic groupings, this cultural heterogeneity makes the region more prone to conflict (Borthakur, 2017).

Due to its mixed population and the presence of various ethnic groups who live in close proximity, the Ferghana Valley is considered one of the most conflict generating territories in Central Asia. Nowadays, ethnicity plays a significant role in the ongoing conflict

and the key feature of the subregion is that each conflict can develop or transform into an ethnic conflict. The root cause of the majority of the conflicts prevalent in the border region between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is due to the domination of a particular ethnic group over the other ethnic group (Borthakur, 2017 & Karinbayev, 2020). Matveeva (2017) stresses the importance of identity and ethnicity as a cause of conflict. Although some scholars on the region often tend to downplay the significance of ethnic differences, the factor of ethnicity has grown in significance since early independence of the post-Soviet states (Matveeva, 2017). Ethnic differences have acquired a more negative connotation and local actors increasingly perceive everyday conflicts in ethnic terms.

Ethnic differences have become more pronounced in the past decades. The use of ethnic affiliation has become more prominent and the association with the nation-state has increased. National-patriotic values have grown stronger and disputes between communities residing on different sides of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border are increasingly being interpreted as a matter of national survival. In the Ferghana Valley, ethno-nationalist sentiments are increasing at an unprecedented rate. Land and territory have a symbolic meaning for nationhood and state action is aimed at emphasising the dominant ethnicity by claiming a cultural space (Borthakur, 2017 & Matveeva, 2017). Ethnic polarisation ends up in arguments such as ‘this is our historical land’ and ‘you have no right to be here’. Such arguments emotionally resonate, evoke feelings of patriotism and enable the mobilisation for the defence of territorial integrity.

Insecurity and fear are catalysts for identity formation in border communities. Borders are often identified as a place where people project their fears onto each other. Local communities and authorities do not expect positive intentions from their neighbouring ethnic groups (Borthakur, 2017 & Matveeva, 2017). Communities residing on the different sides of the border are depicted as an existential threat to the survival of the homeland (Deen & Drost, 2021). People in the Tajik-Kyrgyz border region live under constant fear that other ethnic groups will encroach on their territory, deprive them of resources and assets and project instability across the borders with the potential for violence to erupt from such actions. These inter-ethnic tensions disrupt social-economic linkages and increase the ethnic strife between the communities across the border (Borthakur, 2017 & Matveeva, 2017).

The artificial delineation of the borders in the Ferghana Valley during the Soviet era did not take into account the ethnic composition of the region (Karinbayev, 2020). Creating enclaves was an intended plan to divide the land in a way that would undermine earlier political structures (Borthakur, 2017). An enclave is a part of a state surrounded by the

territory of another state. An enclave relative to the main territory of the country - the kinstate - is called an exclave (Karinbayev, 2020). The Ferghana Valley consists of several enclaves, including the two Tajik exclaves Vorukh and Kayragach over the Kyrgyzstan border (Kurmanalieva, 2018). The problems of enclaves and exclaves have made the Ferghana Valley one of the most dangerous and unstable regions in the world. Each conflict in the subregion can develop or transform into an ethnic conflict due to the mixed population. The presence of enclaves has negatively impacted the relation between the states in the Ferghana Valley. The Vorukh enclave is the most prone to conflict. The excessive politicisation of the history of this region and the assertion of 'autochthony' by ethnic groups have led to claims of historical rights over many enclaves and adjacent areas. These conflictual ethnic claims often spark ethnic conflict in the region (Karinbayev, 2020).

4.5 Socio-economic Causes of Conflict

Socio-economic factors are one of the main forces behind the conflict in the Ferghana Valley (Borthakur, 2017). The Ferghana Valley was considered as one of the most flourishing regions in Central Asia during the Soviet era. The disintegration of the Soviet Union led to a number of economic problems. State farms were dissolved and the system of collective farming in agriculture was abolished. This negatively affected the residents of the Ferghana Valley, making them more vulnerable to poverty and economic insecurity (Artem, 2007). Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan heavily relied on Soviet subsidies for its agriculture and stock-breeding. The lack of economic resources after the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in profound impoverishment and the disappearance of important industries (Fernández-Montesinos, 2013).

Nowadays, social tensions in the region are caused by overpopulation, a dearth of land and unemployment which hinder economic prosperity (Borthakur, 2017). The economic situation in the region is characterised by widespread corruption, a large shadow economy, inefficient economic reforms, an unfavourable investment climate, the poor development of small and medium business and the collapse of the local market due to governmental isolationist measures and the toughening up of the border conditions (Artem, 2007).

Unemployment in the region partially results from the rupture of economic ties with neighbouring countries. The unemployment rate has reached a catastrophic level, especially amongst young people. Citizens in the Ferghana Valley are prompted to compete for employment due to the high population density, the scarcity of job opportunities and the low

level of industrialisation (Borthakur, 2017). The competition over the limited availability of formal employment opportunities increases social tensions and conflict.

Perceived socio-economic equality between ethnic groups mobilises individuals to participate in ethnic violence. Ethnic divisions in the working class between the poor underclass of unskilled workers and the rich elites fuel frustrations. Different ethnic groups accuse each other of ethnic exclusion from top positions. Feelings of deprivation and the fear of a mono-ethnic elite suppressing ethnic minorities stokes social tensions (Artem, 2007).

Social unrest is closely tied to economic reasons, since the high unemployment and low standard of living of most of the population provide no opportunity to change their lives for the better. Residents of the Ferghana Valley living in bad economic conditions are more willing to participate in violence and illegal acts, because they have nothing to lose. Citizens are forced to look for illegal ways of earning a living due to the absence of legal sources of income and the primitive state of the economic legislation creates a breeding ground for corruption (Artem, 2007).

Overall, poverty, unemployment and inefficient economic reforms form the basis of the negative spiral taking place in the Ferghana Valley.

4.5 Results

The Ferghana Valley - at the heart of Central Asia - is one of the most unstable and conflict-prone regions in Central Asia. Throughout the history of the region, this valley has been the starting point of violent conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the valley became administratively and ethnically divided between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Over the past decades, tensions among the different ethnic, social and political groups have been increasing because of overpopulation, the increasing scarcity of natural resources, economic hardships and social differentiation that occurred during the political, economic and social transformation after the Soviet Union collapsed (Kazbekov, Pak & Wegerich, 2014). The border region between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is an ethnically and culturally complex region, which witnesses a number of problems ranging from inter-ethnic tensions to border incursions, competition over scarce natural resources and a variety of socio-economic difficulties. The main reason behind in the conflict in the Kyrgyz-Tajik border region are the sudden rise in the ethnic consciousness of the people, the artificial delineation of the border which has divided the ethnic groups in the region, the socio-economic situation of the Ferghana Valley and the competition between

ethnic groups for the control of scarce resources such as pasture grounds, water and arable land (Borthakur, 2017).

The conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is multidimensional in nature. The conflict is characterised by an interplay of several underlying dynamics and the intertwining causes of the conflict reinforce each other. Historical border disputes stemming from the poorly defined Soviet demarcations form the foundation for ongoing tensions. The competition for scarce natural resources - such as arable land, pasture grounds and water - between different ethnic groups intensifies these disputes and ethnic tensions and economic hardships in the Ferghana Valley further complicate the precarious situation. The conflict causes are deeply intertwined, creating a self-reinforcing and escalating cycle of violence and instability that is difficult to break.

Over the past decades, the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has fundamentally changed in both nature and intensity. The conflict was initially characterised by low-level and subnational violence by local cross-border communities over access to natural resources, ethnic differences, border disputes and infrastructure interruption. Aforementioned skirmishes predominantly involved local citizens and often were called 'Ketmen Wars' as they were limited in scope and conducted for the most part with agricultural weapons (Sullivan, 2021). The Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict in 2014 marked a new dynamic of severe militarised border clashes. This conflict marks a fundamental shift from local small-scale violence towards the involvement of regular army units and heavy weaponry, including mortars and rocket-propelled grenades (Kurmanalieva, 2018 & Toktomushev, 2017). The conflict intensified even more in 2021 when security forces allegedly used heavy military equipment and exchanged gunfire and mortars at multiple points along the border, leading to significant casualties and mass evacuations (Kanayama, 2022 & Sullivan, 2021). This escalation peaked in 2022 when the most intense clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan since the dissolution of the Soviet Union were depicted almost as an intergovernmental war due to the number of casualties and destruction involved (Baizakova et al., 2023). This four-day armed conflict resulted in one of the bloodiest border incidents in recent history, resulting from the deployment of military aircrafts, missile systems and armoured vehicles by both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Vennick, 2022). Overall, the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has fundamentally changed from local cross-border skirmishes to a militarised interstate conflict.

5. Conclusion

Based on the empirical data provided in chapter four, one can conclude that both geopolitics and political ecology contribute to understanding the causes and underlying dynamics of the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

This analysis has provided significant evidence supporting hypothesis one which states that *"If a resource-rich unitary state disintegrates, the likelihood of a resource-related interstate conflict between the resulting independent states increases."* After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, both independent Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had to compete for vital natural resources, especially water, pasture grounds and arable land. A zero-sum game arose whereby the gain in natural resources by one state is equivalent to the loss of natural resources for the other state. The use of water resources by one state resulted in decreasing water availability in the other state. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are highly dependent on water for irrigation purposes. Decreasing water supplies are disastrous for the Kyrgyz and Tajik agricultural societies as this immediately leads to a decrease in arable land. Both countries started to compete for scarce natural resources which exacerbated tensions. Eventually, the interstate competition for scarce natural resources resulted in an interstate conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that broke out in 2021 and continued in 2022. Although the disintegration of a resource-rich state did eventually result in an interstate conflict between the resulting independent states, this hypothesis does not entirely capture the reality on the ground.

The second hypothesis which argues that *"If local cross-border violence related to competition over scarce natural resources, ethnicity and border disputes is present, the likelihood of an interstate conflict breaking out increases."* offers a more accurate understanding of the causes that contributed to the interstate conflict. This hypothesis provides a more comprehensive understanding of the causes that jointly contributed to the interstate conflict. The interstate conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan which eventually erupted in 2021 was fueled by decades of longstanding local cross-border conflicts related to competition over scarce natural resources, socio-economic hardships, ethnicity and border disputes. These low-level local cross-border conflicts predominantly involved local citizens and often were called 'Ketmen Wars' as they were limited in scope and conducted for the most part with agricultural weapons. The escalation of local cross-border violence resulted in a fundamental shift from local small-scale violence towards the involvement of regular army units and heavy weaponry. This marked a new dynamic of severe militarised border clashes. This escalation peaked in 2022 when the most intense clashes between

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan since the dissolution of the Soviet Union were depicted almost as an intergovernmental war due to the number of casualties and destruction involved. This armed conflict resulted in one of the bloodiest border incidents in recent history, resulting from the deployment of military aircrafts, missile systems and armoured vehicles by both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Overall, the escalation of local cross-border conflicts related to competition over scarce natural resources, socio-economic hardships, ethnicity and border disputes eventually caused an interstate conflict between the independent states.

In light of the research question *"To what extent can the interstate conflict between post-Soviet states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan be explained from a geopolitical or a political ecology perspective?"*, we can conclude that the political ecology perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of the causes and underlying dynamics of the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Geopolitics adopts a more narrow perspective which exclusively focuses on interstate war revolving from the interstate competition for access to scarce natural resources. Such a narrow and reductionist approach overlooks the multidimensionality of conflicts and thereby risks oversimplification. Political ecology provides a much more multidimensional, comprehensive and holistic perspective that captures the complex conflict dynamics. Its analysis adequately reflects the local realities on the ground by arguing that local cross-border conflicts related to competition over scarce natural resources, socio-economic hardships, ethnicity and border disputes ultimately caused an interstate conflict between the independent states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Overall, has contributed to the fields of political ecology and geopolitics by applying these frameworks to an understudied conflict in the Central Asian region. Studies that adopt a geopolitical or a political perspective regarding the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan do not even exist yet, a knowledge gap I addressed with this thesis. This research has advanced the existing knowledge on geopolitics and enriched the scarce existing academic literature on the understudied conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The institutional incapacity of both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to conduct sustained and policy-relevant research has resulted in ineffective decision-making. This thesis has addressed this practical, pervasive capacity gap by collecting systematic evidence conducting research which can be used for improving policy decisions. This research and applied analysis can be used to make well-informed policy decisions that address the root causes of conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Moreover, this research has practical implications for the local communities and states directly affected by the conflict. By providing a deeper understanding of the factors driving

the conflict, this analysis can contribute to efforts aimed at fostering cooperation, promoting dialogue and ultimately achieving a peaceful resolution.

5.1 Evaluation and Limitations

Acknowledging and addressing the limitations of this thesis is a sign of transparency and enhances the credibility of the research. It allows readers to understand the boundaries of this thesis and shows that I have a comprehensive understanding of the subject and that I am aware of this research's constraints. In addition, reflecting on the limitations also provides the opportunity to identify the areas where further research is needed. Lastly, acknowledging limitations creates realistic expectations about what this thesis can conclude which avoids misleading conclusions.

This thesis primarily relied on specific types of secondary sources of data - academic journals and books - which may have resulted in potential biases. Academic literature is overrepresented while other data sources such as local non-governmental reports are underrepresented. The predominant dependence on secondary sources of data limits direct engagement with local communities which are directly affected by the conflict. These perspectives and viewpoints could have provided alternative insights to the underlying conflict dynamics. The absence of field data such as interviews and direct observations potentially restricts the understanding of local viewpoints. This - to a certain extent - detaches this thesis from the actual context on the ground. Moreover, this research primarily relied on English data sources. Although a significant number of writers and authors originate from this region, translation issues could have affected the accuracy of the used data.

Whether the findings of this research are generalizable and applicable to other interstate conflicts is yet to find out. Despite the fact that a single case study allows for an in-depth analysis, it does not provide a comparative element that displays similarities and differences across multiple cases. A comparative case study could have generated more generalizable findings. The extent to which the findings and conclusions drawn from this single case study can be generalised, is limited. Each interstate conflict has unique and complex conflict-specific factors that play a role due to different historical, socio-economic, cultural and ethnic contexts.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

To enhance the generalizability of these findings and conclusions, I recommend applying this analysis to a broader set of cases. Conducting - for example - a comparative case study

involving multiple post-Soviet states can identify similarities and strengthen the generalizability of the findings. In addition, it could also display unique differences which results in a more comprehensive understanding of conflict causes and which would provide valuable new insights. Furthermore, it is also interesting to see if these findings are applicable outside the post-Soviet region. I would recommend applying this analysis to a broader population of politically unstable and resource-rich states outside the Post-Soviet region, which experienced a similar political transition to independent states and whereby multiple actors try to gain control over the natural resources. This would help determine whether the observed dynamics in this single case study are unique to the post-Soviet region or applicable to a broader set of cases outside this specific context.

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