

Desertification, climate change and border: The Aral Sea borderlands before/after the collapse of USSR

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The catastrophes of the Aral Sea and societies around it are known as one of the worst ecological disasters of the twentieth century, which surely grew out of the context of the Cold War, where the Soviet Union strove to probe the superiority of socialism through the extensive model of development including irrigation and dam/canal construction. During the Soviet time until the end of the 1970s, the "internal" "aquatic" border lied down across the Kazakh SSR and Uzbek SSR, which had constituted one integrated economic zone. However, due to the desiccation of the Aral Sea and the subsequent desertification gradually has transformed the borderlands, which finally lost its economic integrity because of the cessation of the direct navigation and the devastation of inland water fisheries. In December 1991, the border between two national republics finally became "external" because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the acquisition of independence of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. After independence, the "republican" border became the "state" border, although the borderlands in the Aralkum (Aral Desert) initially had not been well controlled soon after independence. As the desertification proceeded and the aquatic surface of the Aral Sea diminished, on the one hand, Uzbekistan started the full-scaled oil and gas development on the former seabed, which, in turn, enhanced infrastructure building and border control. On the other, Kazakhstan extended the zone of the Barsakelmes Nature Reserve, laid on the former Large Aral Sea bed. These "land" use of the former waterbody in both countries made the desertic border invisible and extraordinary for ordinary citizens on the Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan borderlands, although the border itself materialized enough. The desiccation of the Aral Sea resulted in micro-climate change in the region. In addition, hydrologists and glaciologists insist that climate change (global warming) may give negative impacts upon the transboundary water balance in the basin due to glacial melting, which further worsens water shortage of the Aral Sea. The paper will follow the social processes of bordering on the Aral Sea borderlands, considering the meaning of desertification and climate change effects for borders/borderlands generally.