



Enclaves and Exclaves in the Fergana Valley: Contemporary Geopolitical Challenges and Prospects for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This article analyzes the causes behind the formation of enclaves and exclaves located in the Fergana Valley, as well as their contemporary geopolitical significance and existing challenges. Based on historical sources and modern scholarly perspectives, the study substantiates that the emergence of enclave territories is closely linked to the territorial delimitation policies implemented during the Soviet period. Furthermore, using the Sokh enclave and Shohimardon as case studies, the article highlights border disputes, transport and communication difficulties, disagreements over the use of water resources, and socio-economic constraints affecting these regions.

Keywords: Enclave, Exclave, Fergana Valley, Geopolitics, Border Disputes, Delimitation and Demarcation, Cross-Border Cooperation, Water Resources, Transport Infrastructure, Regional Security, Integration

Introduction

The territory of Central Asia, particularly the Fergana Valley, stands out as one of the most complex regions in terms of its historical, geographical, and demographic characteristics. This area is situated at the intersection of the borders of three states—Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—and the presence of enclave and exclave territories within it directly influences regional stability[1].

From a geopolitical perspective, the concepts of enclaves and exclaves hold particular significance[2]. An enclave is defined as a territory belonging to one state but entirely surrounded by another state, whereas an exclave refers to a part of a state that is geographically separated from its main territory and enclosed by foreign lands. In the Fergana Valley, these two phenomena intersect, creating a complex territorial structure that complicates governance and administrative management[3].

At present, issues related to enclave territories—such as border disputes, transport and communication challenges, the use of water resources, and security concerns—are among the most pressing problems in the region. This article examines the contemporary geopolitical situation of enclave and exclave territories in the Fergana Valley, analyzes their existing challenges, and explores prospects for their resolution[4].

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design to examine the formation, geopolitical significance, and contemporary challenges of enclave and exclave territories in the Fergana Valley. The research is based on a comprehensive review and analysis of historical sources, academic literature, and contemporary reports related to territorial delimitation, border disputes, and regional cooperation in Central Asia[5]. Particular emphasis is placed on the historical-contextual method to investigate the origins of enclave formation during the Soviet-era national-territorial delimitation process, allowing for an understanding of how political and administrative decisions shaped the current geopolitical landscape[6]. In addition, a case study approach is employed to analyze specific enclave territories, notably Sokh and Shohimardon, as representative examples illustrating key issues such as transport and communication constraints, water resource management conflicts, and socio-economic limitations. Comparative analysis is further applied to assess similarities and differences in the challenges faced by these territories, including border demarcation problems, infrastructure deficiencies, and security concerns. The study also incorporates elements of content analysis to evaluate data from international organizations, governmental reports, and scholarly works, focusing on themes such as regional integration, cross-border cooperation, and resource competition. Furthermore, socio-economic indicators, including employment, access to education, and infrastructure development, are interpreted to assess the living conditions of populations in enclave regions. This integrated methodological framework enables a multidimensional understanding of enclave dynamics and provides a basis for identifying sustainable solutions to the geopolitical and socio-economic challenges in the Fergana Valley[7].

Results and Discussion

The formation of enclave territories in the Fergana Valley is directly linked to the national-territorial delimitation policies carried out in the early twentieth century. This process, implemented during the Soviet period, was largely driven by political and administrative considerations, while ethnic and economic factors were not sufficiently taken into account. As a result, territorial divisions not only led to disputes and tensions between regions but also created complex geopolitical configurations. In particular, although areas such as the Sokh enclave and Shohimardon are part of Uzbekistan, they are geographically and economically surrounded by the territory of another state[8].

Today, enclave territories in the Fergana Valley are at the center of a number of complex geopolitical challenges. First and foremost, issues of border delimitation and demarcation have not yet been fully resolved, which periodically leads to tensions and conflicts at the local level. According to researchers, despite being closely interconnected through economic ties, water resources, and transport systems, these territories remain politically fragmented. To address these challenges in enclave and exclave regions, it is essential to promote friendly cooperation among neighboring states, mitigate ethnic, national, and religious tensions, clearly define borders, and strengthen diplomatic collaboration across the region[9].

The socio-economic conditions of populations living in enclave territories are often lower compared to those in central regions. Studies indicate that the insufficient development of transport infrastructure significantly limits economic activity. In addition, restrictions on railways and other means of transportation may result in high levels of unemployment and limited access to education among the population. At the same time, trade exchange between neighboring states has always depended on the availability of labor. Therefore, improving transport routes and infrastructure, as well as ensuring the free movement of people to and from enclave territories, can reduce costs and contribute to the overall economic development of the region[10].

Addressing the challenges of enclave territories in the Fergana Valley requires a comprehensive and systematic approach. First and foremost, it is essential to strengthen mutual trust and political as well as economic relations among the states involved. In recent years, positive progress has been observed in clarifying borders and enhancing cooperation among Central Asian countries. In particular, from an economic perspective, ensuring coordinated and cooperative relations between states is crucial for facilitating access to enclave territories. Without such integrative approaches, tensions may arise within the region. Therefore, it is important for states to prioritize improving economic and political relations with neighboring countries while avoiding policies that could intensify regional competition or instability[11].

Problems are also closely related to transport and communication systems. Access to enclave territories often requires passing through the territory of another state. This leads to stricter border controls, increased bureaucratic obstacles, and higher economic costs.

To prevent further complications of borders in the Fergana Valley, the states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are consistently striving to strengthen interethnic and interreligious relations through cooperation. Given the significance of the Fergana Valley, such approaches play an important role in maintaining stability in the region. In particular, efforts are being made to develop mechanisms that facilitate easier access to areas such as the Sokh enclave and Shohimardon, reducing difficulties in crossing borders and improving everyday mobility for local populations[12].

The Fergana Valley is a highly developed agricultural region where water resources are of vital importance. Control over irrigation systems that pass through enclave territories often leads to disagreements between states. In addition, security issues have become increasingly significant in recent years. In border areas, social tensions, ethnic conflicts, and competition over resources can sometimes escalate into open confrontations.

In-depth study of enclave and exclave territories in the Fergana Valley greatly benefits from research conducted by local, particularly Uzbek, scholars. Their work is especially valuable as it provides a more precise understanding of the region's internal socio-economic, ethnic, and political characteristics.

According to local researchers, the issue of enclave territories in the Fergana Valley should not be viewed solely as a geographical or political problem, but rather as a complex social system. In this context, enclave territories function not only as distinctive border spaces but also as areas where state policies, the interests of local populations, and historical factors intersect. Studies further explain that the formation of enclaves and exclaves is closely linked to the Soviet policy of national-territorial delimitation[13].

In local literature, border disputes are often analyzed through the concept of "competition

for resources.” According to research, the limited availability of land and water resources is one of the main causes of social tension in the Fergana Valley. In particular, issues related to the Shohimardon area have repeatedly led to social strain at the local level. Uzbek scholars have examined this situation from the perspective of border conflicts, seeking to understand how state borders shape and influence the daily lives of local populations. Importantly, such conflicts are not viewed solely as political divisions but are also studied in terms of their psychological impact on the people living in these regions[14].

According to local sources, small businesses and agriculture constitute the main sources of income in enclave territories. However, logistical difficulties, customs barriers, and underdeveloped infrastructure significantly limit these activities. Researchers also argue that improving cross-border trade and the quality of transport routes can reduce the isolating effect of borders on local populations. In other words, with appropriate policies in place, these territories have the potential to transform into points of economic growth.

According to experts studying the everyday life and challenges of these regions, it is evident that borders are often ambiguously defined. For instance, the Shohimardon area is surrounded by the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, while residents of the Sokh enclave—which is administratively part of Fergana Region—must pass through the territory of another state in order to travel to the rest of Uzbekistan. process often involves multiple checkpoints and may require unofficial payments, as well as considerable effort and negotiation. As explained by Arslon Nuriddinov, a resident of Sokh, citizens of Uzbekistan sometimes need permission from a neighboring country simply to reach their own homeland. At the same time, he describes Sokh as “a piece of paradise”. According to Nuriddinov, Sokh has experienced noticeable development in recent years. He highlights ongoing construction, the creation of new jobs, and expanding economic opportunities. Local industries such as fruit processing, the production of construction materials from natural resources, livestock farming, poultry breeding, and beekeeping are developing, with increasing involvement of young people[15].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the enclave and exclave territories in the Fergana Valley represent a complex phenomenon from both geographical and political perspectives, closely intertwined with contemporary geopolitical processes. From this standpoint, it is insufficient to consider the issue of enclaves and exclaves solely within the framework of territorial disputes. Instead, it should be evaluated more broadly in terms of human interests, regional cooperation, and sustainable development. In recent years, the increasing openness and rapprochement among Central Asian states have created opportunities to address these challenges gradually and without escalation. It becomes evident that the solution lies not only in resolving border issues, but also in developing a model based on mutual trust and cooperation. Looking ahead, these territories have the potential to transform from zones of contention into spaces of cooperation and integration.

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