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Demining the Tajik-Uzbek Border: What have we learned from the Tajik experience?

by Henrique Garbino [Swiss Foundation for Mine Action] and Erkin Huseinov
[UNDP Support to the Tajikistan Mine Action Programme]

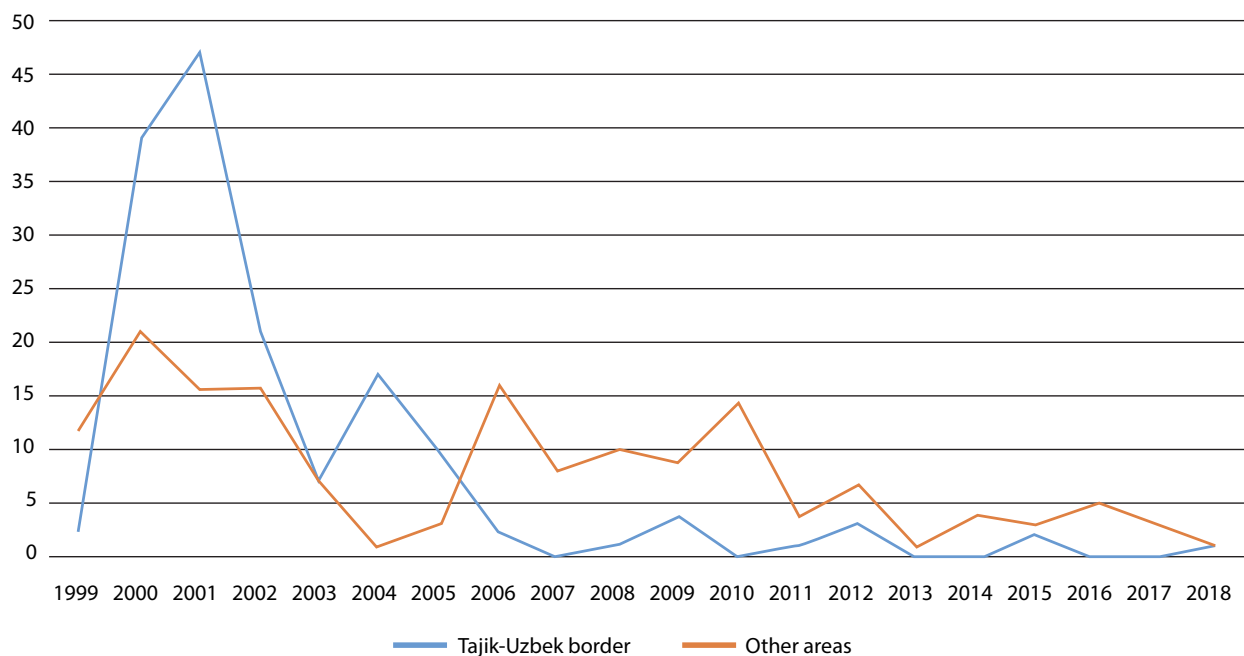


Figure 1. Mine victims on the Tajik-Uzbek border in comparison with the rest of Tajikistan.⁶
All figures courtesy of the authors.

Following the recent political rapprochement between the governments of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in March 2018, a joint commission was created to investigate the minefields along the Tajik-Uzbek border and schedule their clearance.¹ The Uzbek government first expressed the intention to remove the landmines along its borders in 2004 and later reported the start of unilateral demining operations in 2005 by the Uzbek military.²⁻⁴ Less than three years later, Uzbek demining teams had reportedly cleared 95 percent of the minefields along the Tajik border.⁵ However, this has not been verified by independent organizations, and civilians still fall victim to landmines in that region.⁶

The border between the countries is still disputed and remains mostly unmarked, making it difficult, if not impossible, to determine precisely on which side of the border mines

were laid. As recently as 2001, Uzbek forces laid anti-personnel landmines along the still-disputed border with Tajikistan, reportedly to prevent incursions from Islamic militants operating in the area.⁷ While it is likely that most of the minefields were laid on the Uzbek side of the border, Tajik authorities consider the overall area to have a “high degree of mine risk on both sides of the border.”⁸

The Tajik-Uzbek border is approximately 1,230 km (764.3 mi) long and runs along 17 districts in eastern and northern Tajikistan. According to the Tajik statistical agency, there are about three million people living in these districts, who are mostly engaged in agriculture.⁹ The Uzbek government claims that landmines were planted in the mountainous border areas, which are difficult to monitor and control. However, according to a 2004 report from the Integrated

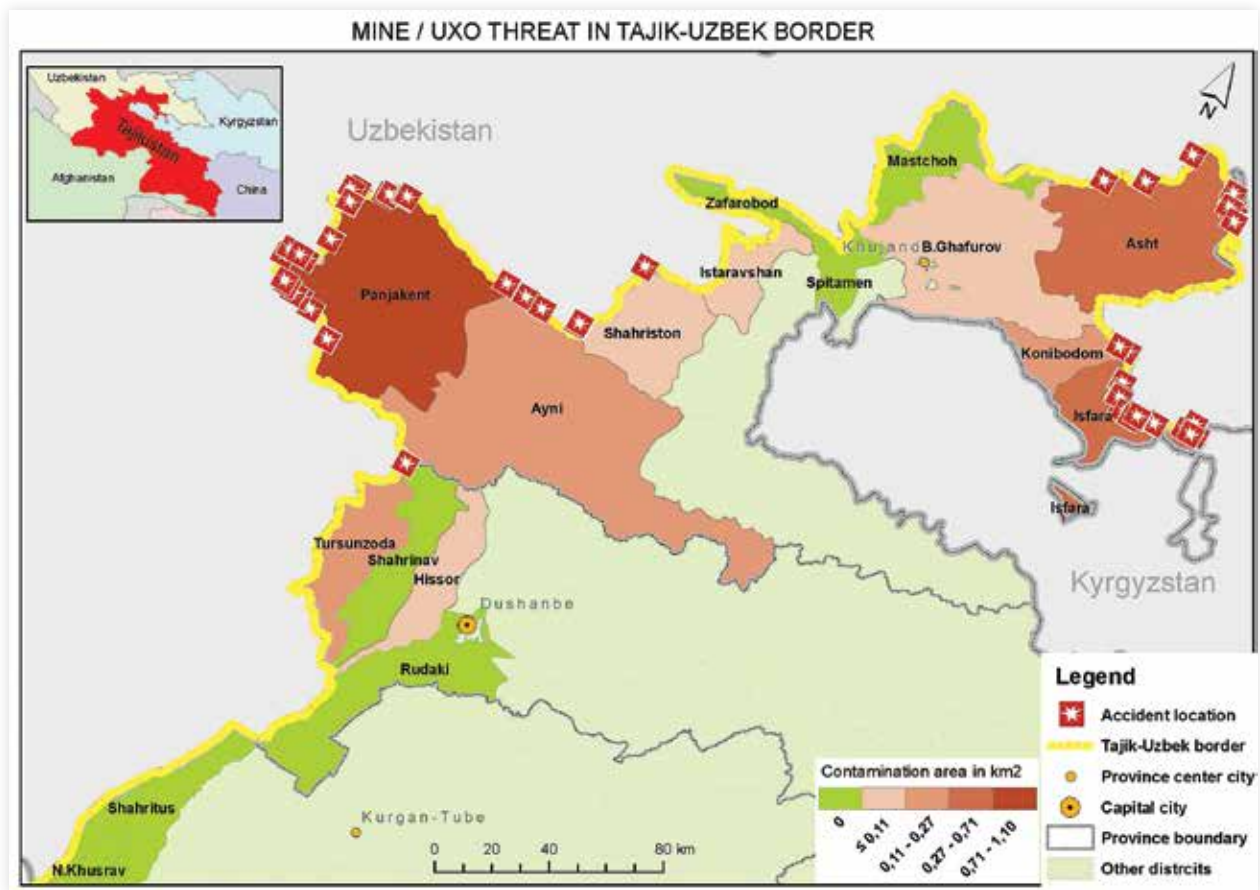


Figure 2. Mine accidents along the Tajik-Uzbek border.⁶

Regional Information Networks (IRIN), experts suggest up to 70 percent of the Tajik-Uzbek border might have been mined, including the flatlands.²

While mine clearance has been conducted in central Tajikistan and along the Tajik-Afghan border, no clearance has occurred along the disputed Tajik-Uzbek border. At least 157 people have experienced mine accidents along the Tajik-Uzbek border, accounting for roughly half of all mine casualties in Tajikistan since 1999.⁶ Despite the risk posed by anti-personnel mines, no land release activity has taken place on the Tajik side except for limited impact surveys.¹⁰ To date, the exact locations of the minefields are unknown to Tajik authorities.⁸

Humanitarian demining in the region clearly presents many technical and political challenges. However, the experiences accumulated from almost fifteen years of mine action in other regions of the country offer many opportunities. Tajik national authorities, together with implementing partners, have established the necessary structures and coordination mechanisms for effective mine action in Tajikistan.

Moreover, the country has provided examples of bilateral and regional cooperation initiatives. For instance, the Tajik-Afghan cross-border mine clearance project implemented

by the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD) has worked to address the mine contamination in Afghanistan's Darwaz province. In addition, several regional explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) courses were supported by the Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office in Dushanbe. The courses enhanced regional EOD capability and strengthened defense cooperation in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Understanding the Problem

Even though the minefields, which are reportedly defensive in nature, are thought to be mostly on the Uzbek side of the border, there have been a series of mine accidents in Tajik-claimed territory.⁶ A great part of the problem lies in the fact that the Tajik-Uzbek border is still disputed and is mostly unmarked.¹¹ Moreover, minefields or individual mines might have been moved due to natural phenomena, such as heavy rainfall, landslides, avalanches, or earthquakes, or even local citizens might have manually moved individual mines.^{8,12}

From 2011 to 2015, the Tajikistan National Mine Action Centre (TNMAC) coordinated mixed teams that conducted non-technical survey missions to assess the risk of

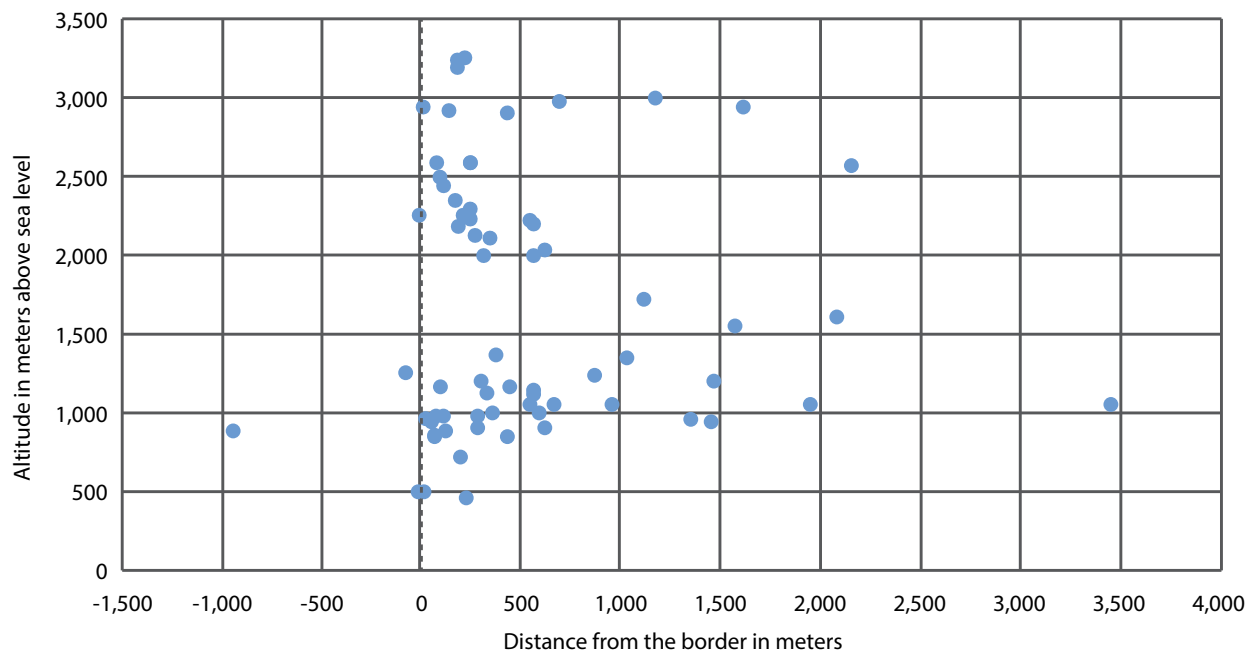


Figure 3. Mine accidents by altitude and distance from the border.⁶

contamination in the ten districts bordering Uzbekistan in Sughd province. The surveys registered 82 mine accidents and 60 suspected hazardous areas in six of those districts.⁶ The lack of demarcation makes it easy for locals, often looking for fodder, firewood, or to cross the border to meet family members, to stray across the minefields.⁸ TNMAC officially concluded that minefields were at least 50 m (54.7 yd) into the Uzbek side of the border; however, three accidents occurred in Tajik territory.¹³ In the first accident, an explosive device was likely moved by mudslides from the mountains and then collected by children from the nearby village. The second and third accidents occurred in the same area and within a couple of hours when a shepherd stepped on a landmine (most likely an OZM-72) in territory that had previously been cleared by Uzbek deminers, and when his grandson came to help, the grandson fell victim to another landmine. It should be noted here that TNMAC's conclusions are somewhat subjective

because they did not have enough access to the minefields due to border security concerns.^{6,14} At least six other districts bordering Uzbekistan remain to be surveyed.¹⁵

Laid according to Russian military doctrine, Uzbek minefields are likely to be recorded, mapped, and mostly comprised of anti-personnel mines.^{16,17} Based on impact survey reports and national averages, it is possible to estimate an initial confirmed hazardous area of roughly 3.3 sq km (1.27 sq mi), which is calculated to take approximately three years for full clearance.¹⁸ When compared with the initial assessment proposed by IRIN in 2004, the available data on mine accidents along the Tajik-Uzbek border suggest a completely different picture. It is estimated that only 3 percent, or 35.8 km (22.25 mi), of the border is mined.¹⁹ One should also take into account that the estimation is based on casualty data, thus likely to be underreported, and that not all districts along the border have been surveyed.

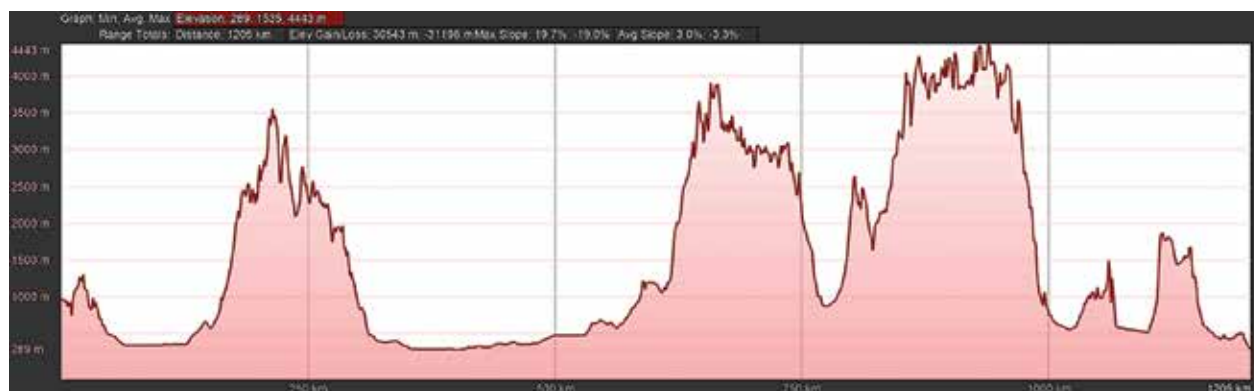


Figure 4. Tajik-Uzbek border elevation profile.²⁰

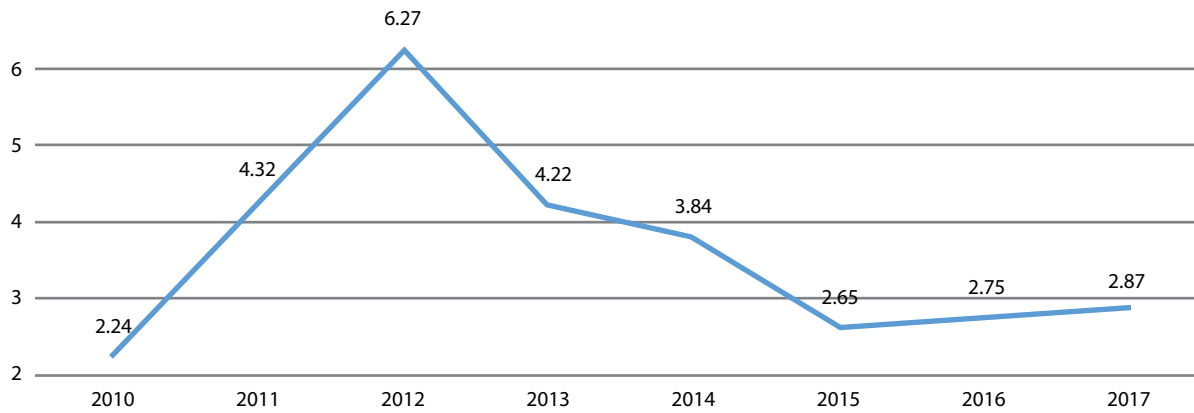


Figure 5. Donor funding for the Tajikistan mine action program from 2010 to 2017.⁶

Even though no mine clearance operation has taken place on the Tajik side of the border, the National Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan on Humanitarian Mine Action acknowledges the mine threat in the region. Accordingly, TNMAC has targeted the districts of Panjakent, Ayni, Asht, Isfara, Shahrison, and Konibodom for mine risk education and victim assistance programs.⁸

Mine clearance in the region is likely to be affected by extreme temperatures, heavy rainfall, and landslides in spring and summer, and snow in winter. Limited capacity for casualty evacuation further limits mine clearance activities. As a result, manual demining teams are only able to work about nine months per year in Tajikistan, without accounting for rest, recreation, and bad weather.¹¹ In central Tajikistan as well as along the Tajik-Afghan border, demining teams work, on average, less than 130 days per year. Our findings indicate that around 50 percent of the minefields on the Tajik-Uzbek border were laid in flat areas and would allow for mechanical demining and dog detection technologies, which can considerably increase the efficiency of demining operations.^{6,11}

The involvement of international organizations in the demining effort could help facilitate the interaction between the two governments; however, bureaucracy and rigid decision-making structures often delay and sometimes impede the work of these organizations in supporting the mine action program in Tajikistan.¹⁷ Furthermore, recent developments in international funding for the Tajik mine action program suggest donor fatigue.²¹

Cross-border Cooperation

In spite of the many challenges presented above, the Tajik experience suggests there are many opportunities for demining the border with Uzbekistan. Since 2003, TNMAC has developed national mine action standards, created a national mine action center, established working relationships with its implementing partners, trained personnel to

undertake quality assurance and land release up to international standards, and implemented information management mechanisms.²²⁻²⁴

Moreover, previous victim assistance exchange programs and the current cross-border operations in Afghanistan have shown that TNMAC is willing and able to cooperate with regional counterparts.^{25,26} Largely boosted by OSCE, Tajikistan has become a key actor in supporting regional cooperation for capacity building and information sharing in mine action and explosive hazards clearance.²⁷

Even though political relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have been fragile at best, demining their shared borders may present a good opportunity for closer cooperation in security issues. Furthermore, experienced implementing partners could be tasked to carry out mine clearance in the region as an independent neutral third party.²⁸ Finally, the successful start of a cooperation program between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan could lead to renewed donor interest in the region. ©

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