WATER DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA: STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING CONFLICTS IN TRANSBOUNDARY WATER GOVERNANCE

THESIS

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Declaration

Herewith I declare that I clearly understand §11 of the Academy Regulation and that the submitted paper is accepted by the OSCE Academy in Bishkek on the understanding that it is my own effort without falsification of any kind. I declare that I am aware of the consequences of plagiarism or/and cheating.

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ABSTRACT

In Central Asia, cooperation over shared rivers like the Syr Darya has often alternated with periods of tension, especially around water allocation and energy needs (Micklin, 2014). Although regional institutions such as ICWC, IFAS, and the Basin Water Organizations have existed for more than 30 years, high-level political commitments often fail to translate into stable institutional practices (Zinzani, 2015; UNDP, 2017). The present literature provides significant understanding of the Soviet legacy, the water–energy nexus, institutional fragmentation, and climate stress. However, these different strands of scholarship largely remain unconnected. Consequently, little is known about how political commitments are interpreted across different levels of governance or why implementation gaps persist.

This paper identifies these disparities and explores how presidential-level statements on Central Asia are conveyed through institutional mechanisms and find, or not, their expression in the actual practices in the Syr Darya basin. The research, based on a qualitative case study design, examines political statements, protocols of the ICWC and IFAS, BWO Syr Darya operational reports, and regional water-energy agreements in the period from 1995 to 2023. It applies multi-level governance theory combined with institutionalism and constructivism to trace the linkages between political intent, institutional decision-making, and reservoir management. Recurring bottlenecks and changes over time emerge when documents are systematically organized and thematically coded.

These results demonstrate that diplomatic rapprochement, especially since 2016, has increased political willingness to cooperate, although often institutional capacity and operational realities have not kept pace. Cooperation strengthens in times of crisis but weakens when stability is reached, while structural asymmetries between upstream and downstream states continuously affect the outcome. This paper helps in having a clear understanding of political signals in relation to institutional constraints, which can help learn lessons for conditions under which more robust and better water diplomacy could potentially be achieved in the Syr Darya River Basin.

This basin-specific method of analysis remedies essential gaps in water diplomacy studies, connecting politics, institutional actions, and practices in water, conflict, and climate issues, providing practical strategies in conflict prevention, region-level trust establishment, and SDG6/16 realization.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASBP	Aral Sea Basin Program
BWO	Basin Water Organization
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation
CAWEP	Central Asia Water and Energy Program
C5+1	Central Asia 5+1 Summits
EB IFAS	Executive Board of IFAS
GEF	Global Environmental Facility
GWP	Global Water Partnership
ICID	International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage
ICSD	Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development
ICWC	Interstate Commission for Water Coordination
IFAS	International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea
IWRM	Integrated Water Resources Management
IWRA	International Water Resources Association
INBO	International Network of Basin Organizations
Kazhydromet	Republican State Enterprise "Kazhydromet"
Kyrgyzhydromet	Hydrometeorology Agency (Kyrgyzstan)
MLG	Multi-Level Governance
RQ	Research Question
SIC ICWC	Scientific Information Centre of ICWC
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
Tajikhydromet	Hydrometeorology Agency (Tajikistan)
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
Uzhydromet	Hydrometeorological Service (Uzbekistan)
WEF	Water-Energy-Food Nexus
WMP	Watershed Management Plan
WPI	Water Pollution Index

INTRODUCTION

Background and Relevance

After independence in 1991, the integrated management system was abrogated, and the region came under the charge of newly independent states with divergent interests and agendas (Water has long been considered one of Central Asia's most politically sensitive and strategically crucial resources (Micklin, 2014; Wegerich and Olsson, 2010; Weinthal, 2002). It is core to national development and international relations, as it is related to food security, hydropower, rural livelihoods, and geopolitical stability (Micklin, 2014; Wegerich and Olsson, 2010). At the international level, the dynamics of water diplomacy are symbolic because the whole region is dependent on two large transboundary rivers, the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, which feed millions of people across multiple states (Wolf, 1998; Sadoff and Grey, 2002; UNECE, 2015). Central Asia remains a particularly symbolic case for understanding these dynamics, since the entire region relies on two major transboundary rivers, the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, which supply water to millions of people across several states (Figure 1) (Dukhovny and Sokolov, 2008; FAO, 2012).

Figure 1. Central Asia Amu Darya and Syr Darya Basins map.
*(*Source: Caspian Post (2023). Available at: https://caspianpost.com/central-asia-central-asia-how-the-u-s-expands-its-influence-through-the-syr-darya-and-amu-darya*)*

With the Soviet era, the distributions and uses of these rivers have been built into a system of centralized planning that coordinates irrigation and hydropower on the

regional level based on winter releases (Allouche, 2007; O'Hara, 2000; Dukhovny and Sokolov, 2008). Following independence in 1991, the system of centralized planning was abrogated and the region was placed under the control of freshly independent states with divergent interests and agendas (Weinthal 2002; Sehring 2009). Upstream countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan rely on winter releases for electricity generation, while downstream countries-Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan on large summer flows for agriculture (McKinney, 2004; Dinar, 2012; Rahaman, 2012). This upstream–downstream asymmetry has been widely cited as the central structural challenge of regional cooperation (Rahaman 2012; Murakami 2017).

The institutional structure of managing transboundary water resources within Central Asia is directed by the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), which is the regional umbrella organization for cooperation on the Aral Sea Basin. Within IFAS, the main water management institution and organization for water allocation and seasonal planning for the Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya River Basins is the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC). ICWC is working without any power or official representatives from the energy and environment sectors, making it difficult for the management of the water and energy interface and regional environmental programs (Dukhovny and Sokolov, 2008; UNDP, 2017; Zinzani, 2015).

The executive bodies, namely the Amu Darya Basin Water Organization and Syr Darya Basin Water Organization, under the ICWC, oversee the water allocation. The two BWOs, along with the Scientific Information Centre of ICWC (SIC ICWC), are headquartered in Uzbekistan. It should, however, be noted that there have been calls for a more balanced geographical structure for water institution allocation during previous efforts to strengthen the regional structure (UNECE-EC IFAS, 2010).The ICWC executive bodies are responsible for water allocation. The powers of these BWOs only exist over the middle and low reaches of the Amu Darya, as well as the middle Syr Darya, leaving their management almost entirely to their national bodies.

The Interstate Commission for Sustainable Development (ICSD), an entity whose mandate overlaps with that of ICWC, is a part of the IFAS structure, though the level of coordination of ICSD with the regionally grouped water entities is not sufficient. As a result of this lack of coordination and because of the lack of a strong enforcement mechanism and outdated infrastructure, even if an agreement is reached, the

relationship between the governments could be the determining factor for implementing that agreement (UNECE-EC IFAS 2010; Zinzani 2015). Nevertheless, the viability of this system remains compromised by a chain of institutional inefficiency, which still remains largely water-sector oriented in its representation and mandate with little involvement of the energy and environmental authorities, which are also important given the importance of this consideration in a basin where water allocation will have an impact, among other things, on energy production (World Bank, 2018; Young et al., 2019). Second, despite being basin-level institutions, their mandate continues to be basically technical and operational in nature, with minimal capacity in enforcing decisions or adjudicating more pervasive policy disputes (Dukhovny and Sokolov, 2008; Ziganshina, 2012). Third, a series of inter- and intra-regional conflicting responsibilities in institutional capacity, most critically in constructing a systematic regional presence among key authorities such as the ICWC and the Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development (ICSD), continues to dilute basin-wide institutional unity and systematically (Tedesco, 2011; World Bank, 2018). Even in these circumstances, where institutions have structurally allocated basin-wide governing responsibilities, implementation increasingly continues to be a product of political will and ad hoc bargain agreements rather than systematic governance responses and capacity-building governance structures in place and strengthened through time and operational experience (Wegerich, 2008; World Bank, 2018).

Beyond this, the changes in climate will further exacerbate droughts, reduce the size of glaciers, and become more unpredictable seasonally in terms of water supply (World Bank, 2010; IPCC, 2021; Karthe et al., 2017). Clearly, the drought in 2008, the heatwave in 2021, and the winter energy crisis in 2023 have demonstrated that the water systems in Central Asia are quite vulnerable to both climatic and energy shock (CAREC, 2012; UNDP 2021)

Political dialogue has also been revived in the last two years. Beginning in 2016, there has been renewed diplomatic activity -primarily led by Uzbekistan to more regular presidential meetings and high-level statements that stressed cooperation, trust, regional interconnectedness and joint responsibility. As noted by Matveeva (2019) and Ernazarov (2020), such a state of affairs indicates a partial turn from the symbolic rhetoric to a more practical level of cooperation. On the other hand, such unilateral initiatives as the Qosh Tepa Canal project for Afghanistan indicate that the dynamic

geopolitical and hydrogeological circumstances can rapidly develop and cause threats to the waters' security. ICG (2023); Weinthal and Paraskova (2020)

In such a context, water diplomacy in the region of Central Asia can by no means be treated as a technical problem, but a significant aspect within the realms of overall regional stability, conflict, and development. Studying the ways through which political commitments are manifested within the highest structural response to such commitments, as well as contained within these commitments, a practice within itself, can be an important input within the realms of overall increased cooperation within the Syr Darya River Basin, as well as significant to debates within transboundary water management as such (Sadoff et al.).

Problem Statement

However, after thirty plus years of political proclamations, regional organizations and technical accords, collaboration across the Syr Darya River is still unstable and unpredictable. It is mentioned by numerous researchers that despite the fact that the leaders of Central Asia openly declare their intentions to create partnership and jointly manage the waters of the region, these intentions are only partially translated into practical, enforceable, and sustainable mechanisms on the institutional and practice levels (Weinthal 2002; Sehring 2009; Rahaman 2012). One of the most perennial, least researched issues of the water governance complex in the region has been the gap between the proclaimed political will and delivery at the ground level.

To support this gap in implementation are a number of factors. To begin with, the priorities of upstream and downstream states are radically different: Kyrgyzstan is dependent on winter water release to the hydropower generation and the downstream states are mostly Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which is dependent on steady summer irrigation flows (McKinney 2004; Dinar 2012). This seasonal imbalance persists and causes conflicts, as well as non-observation of agreements and promises of compensation failing to keep them, which leads to the failure of such long-term cooperation arrangements as the 1998 Syr Darya Water-Energy Agreement (Micklin 2014; Dukhovny and Sokolov 2008).

Second, the regional bodies-the ICWC, IFAS, and Basin Water Organizations do not have a binding power, adequate resources, and recent surveillance systems. These agencies coordinate the seasonal planning and enable dialogue, but do not have the powers to force compliance by states or to prevent them from deviating from agreed schedules (Zinzani 2015; Murakami 2017; UNDP 2017). As a result, the best-formulated institutional decisions are usually superseded by domestic energy interests, agricultural interests, or political imperatives.

Third, operational practice remains the weakest link in the governance chain. The nature of hydrological monitoring is mostly dependent on the Soviet-era infrastructure, highlighting the major deficit of real-time data and fragmented information systems (ADB 2019; CAREC 2012). Such shocks still challenge the feasibility of the current models of coordination (World Bank 2010; IPCC 2021; UNDP 2021).

Research Gap and Justification

Literature available on Central Asia, academic and policy-based, has documented the legal frameworks, institutional history, and hydrologic limitations of the region in a lot of detail. Absent is the systematic examination of the channel through which presidential-level diplomacy - in the form of summit declarations and communiques - is converted both into institutional performance (through mandates, working groups, budgets, and monitoring rules), and into the cooperative performance (through compliance with release schedules, regular data sharing, and consistent water-energy transactions). This is the gap in this thesis. The dissertation focuses on the Syr Darya as the most apparent case of upstream-downstream interdependence, while drawing basin-wide lessons for conflict prevention. Such a focus on the "declaration → implementation" pathway contributes to both theory-primarily how institutions and mutual-gain design interact and practice, and how to make summit diplomacy more reliable and actionable.

Aim and Research Questions

Aim: To explain how water diplomacy in Central Asia can prevent conflict by tracing how presidential summit declarations are translated into institutional mechanisms and operational cooperation, with a focus on the Syr Darya basin.

Research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How has the water diplomacy in Central Asia at the presidential level moved from symbolic commitment to practical cooperation since 1995?

RQ2: What are the conditions under which high-level summit declarations regarding the Syr Darya basin have been successfully translated into concrete institutional and operational outcomes?

RQ3: How do various forms of cooperation, like water–energy swaps, shared data systems, and joint monitoring, contribute to conflict prevention and regional stability?

Scope and Limitations

The thesis focuses on diplomatic, institutional, and operational dimensions of cooperation. Hydrology and climate science are relied upon contextually rather than modeled in any depth. The temporal scope is 1995–2024, starting with the Nukus Declaration and including the recent consultative summits of Heads of State. The institutional focus will be ICWC, IFAS, and related arrangements, such as the 1992 Almaty Agreement and the 1998 Syr Darya mechanisms. The geographical focus is the Aral Sea basin, with an emphasis on the Syr Darya; Afghanistan is recognized as an external variable for the Amu Darya but not treated as a separate case study.

Expected Contribution

The thesis synthesizes Institutionalism rules, mandates, capacity, and compliance with the Water Diplomacy Framework mutual gains, adaptive design, cross-sector linkages. Empirically, it provides a coded, longitudinal analysis of presidential declarations 1995–2024 and traces their institutional translation within ICWC/IFAS and national agencies. Practically, it develops implementation-ready recommendations for clearer mandates in summit texts, predictable financing for monitoring and data systems, professionalization of water diplomacy, and standardized water–energy exchange templates, including contingency rules for wet/dry years. This study contributes to a shift from political signaling toward implementation that is more reliable, reduces seasonal frictions, strengthens trust, and supports SDG 6 and SDG 16.

Thesis Structure

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 reviews existing literature on water governance and regional cooperation in Central Asia. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework based on Institutionalism and the Water Diplomacy Framework. Chapter 3 explains the methodology and data sources. Chapter 4 presents the findings. Chapter 5 discusses the implications for conflict prevention and regional diplomacy. Chapter 6 concludes the study.

CHAPTER 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Overview of Transboundary Water Governance

Transboundary water governance has emerged as one of the central themes of international environmental politics, especially in those regions experiencing scarcity and uneven distribution of water resources. A common consensus exists among scholars that any governance of shared rivers will necessarily be based on a mix of legal frameworks, institutional cooperation, political trust, and technical capacity (Wolf 1998; Sadoff and Grey 2002; Zeitoun and Mirumachi 2008). Although various global experiences show that concerted mechanisms can go a long way in reducing the risks of conflict, they simultaneously indicate that such cooperation is highly susceptible to power asymmetries, economic interdependence, and historical legacies (Dinar 2012; Allan 2001).

These challenges are mainly salient in the post-Soviet regions. According to the literature review, several themes appear throughout the study of transboundary water governance. New independent states have been forced to redefine themselves and their own interests and responsibilities over water resources allocated through centralized state planning (Weinthal 2002; O'Hara 2000). The sudden change from a unified management structure to a multi-state negotiation framework created uncertainties and competition, especially within Central Asia, where agriculture and hydropower rely heavily on the transboundary rivers (Micklin 2014; Dukhovny and Sokolov 2008).

As deduced from the literature review, certain subjects keep recurring throughout the literature on transboundary water governance. First, purely technical agreements cannot be established in the absence of political will and institutional mechanisms supportive of enforcement and sharing of data (Rahaman 2012; Murakami 2017). Second, upstream–downstream asymmetries tend to shape bargaining power, as upstream countries control the flow of water while downstream states possess economic or geopolitical leverage (Dinar 2007; Salman 2018). Thirdly, climatic instabilities and population pressures exacerbate these governance issues as they add uncertainty and make existing infrastructure less resilient (World Bank 2010; IPCC 2021).

The history of the development of regional institutions since independence is the effort to respond to this challenge. Early attempts to create institutions for cooperation include the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC), basin water

organizations (BVOs), and, more recently, the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS). Researchers generally view these institutions as important mechanisms for communication and seasonal coordination; however, they also tend to emphasize the general lack of authority of these institutions, the fragmentation of their mandates, and their dependence on national political will (Dukhovny and Sokolov, 2008; Murthy, 2017). Indeed, many studies emphasize that such institutions were more successful in preventing conflicts than in shaping long-term integrated water resources management.

Despite these limitations, researchers note that interstate cooperation in Central Asia has endured for over three decades. Wolf (1998) famously asserts that few water-related conflicts result in armed conflict, and this observation is somewhat consistent with the Central Asian experience, where—through the worst times of political crisis in the region—seasonal agreements were normally negotiated and put into practice.However, with conflict not being likely, scholars argue that cooperation within the region remains meager, reactive, and always susceptible to political changes, especially in the absence of strong enforcement mechanisms or stable compensation systems in place (UNECE 2011).

Taken together, the literature reveals a region in which the technical foundations of cooperation remain remarkably robust while institutional and political layers are uneven, under-resourced, and often misaligned. This opens up a gap between political declarations and practical outcomes-a gap that this thesis directly examines through the case of the Syr Darya basin.

1.2. Soviet Legacy and Its Impact on Post-Independence Governance

The control of water in Central Asia remains, to some extent, influenced by the profound institutional and infrastructural legacy of the Soviet Union. Throughout the Soviet period, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers were administered as components of a unified economic system, designed to optimize regional rather than national economic efficiencies (O'Hara 2000; Weinthal 2002). Water allocation, reservoir operations, and seasonal releases were managed from Moscow, where hydropower generation in the upstream republics was linked with intense cotton irrigation in the downstream republics (Allan 2001; Dukhovny and Sokolov 2008). Republics were

unable to reject, modify, or renegotiate allocations set by the center under this integrated system, which worked by political fiat rather than negotiation.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, this system simply vanished overnight, creating an 'institutional vacuum' in the region (Allouche, 2007; Sehring, 2009). The newly independent nations were left with an existing infrastructure meant to support a unified technical system but split along state lines. For the upstream states, namely Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, this meant a loss of access to their guaranteed supply of fossil fuels such as gas, coal, and oil from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, which had guaranteed their fuel requirements in the old exchange system under the Soviet Union. Thus, these countries increasingly turned to hydropower production during the winter months to fill their domestic fuel demand requirements in the region (Micklin, 2014). Downstream countries continued to be very reliant on reliable summer runoff for irrigation requirements (Allouche, 2007; Sehring, 2009).

Several scholars argue that the persistence of Soviet-era infrastructure, data systems, and bureaucratic practices continues to constrain contemporary cooperation (Wegerich 2008; Zinzani 2015). The reservoirs at Toktogul and Shardara had been constructed for regional purposes; today their operations rely on national interests-not always aligned. Besides, the institutional logic of the Soviet system, where compliance was guaranteed through the center, was never regained by strong interstate mechanisms. Agreements reached during the post-independence period often depend on goodwill rather than binding enforcement.

Attempts to recreate fundamentals of regional coordination started in the early 1990s when the ICWC was established in 1992, and IFAS was established in 1993. Both were intended to preserve the cooperative elements of Soviet water governance while adapting them to new political realities (Dukhovny et al. 2013). However, there is a wide scholarly recognition that both these institutions inherited the strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet system: strong technical expertise but weak legal authority and limited capacity for governing political disputes (Murakami 2017; UNDP 2017).

The Soviet legacy thus remains a key explanatory factor in understanding why governance gaps remain in the region. The transition from centralized planning to multi-state negotiation did not fully mitigate the structural upstream–downstream asymmetry, nor did it produce robust institutions capable of enforcing agreements. This

historical context is essential for interpreting the patterns of cooperation and conflict observed today in the Syr Darya basin.

1.3. Institutional Fragmentation and Governance Challenges

Institutions are extensively recognized as crucial components of effective transboundary water governance. However, in Central Asia, their performance is limited, fragmented, and often incompatible. Many scholars also note that, while the region has several cooperative bodies, such as the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC), the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), and the Basin Water Organizations (BWOs), these institutions lack authority, resources, and legal instruments to influence state behavior significantly (Sehring 2009; Weinthal 2002). Accordingly, governance outcomes often depend more on shifting political relations than on institutionalized processes.

One of the major problems with this system is a lack of binding or enforceable rules. While decisions of both ICWC and BWO are considered agreed among states, they immediately become recommendations rather than obligations. Generally, countries disregard seasonal water discharge agreements based on demand for energy in their countries or different political positions (Zinzani 2015; Murakami 2017). As no organization in this region enforces these rules, this system continues to work solely on a good will basis and goodwill, which can easily fade in a hostile or rainy political or climatic shock (UNDP 2017; Matveeva 2019).

The other challenge continually encountered is overlapping responsibilities and confusing lines of authority. While duties include water allocation planning and coordination, the role of IFAS is to be a regional cooperation umbrella organization.Under this setup, it is established that environmental and sustainable development considerations will be incorporated using the Interstate Commission for Sustainable Development (ICSD). However, in this case, despite not being well-defined, in situations where they are, these responsibilities continually overlap among IFAS, ICWC, and ICSD in a way that is not always adhered to (Sehring 2009; Wegerich 2008). Additionally, this set-up among institutions has continually led to dup work, rivalry over limited financial resources, and poor communication among institutions.

The Basin Water Organizations, which were established based on a Soviet model, have continued to mainly function institutionally with decisions largely being influenced by higher political considerations, thus leading to a disconnection in implementation and planning at this level (Dukhovny et al.2013; Olimova and Olimov 2010).

A second weakness relates to the capacity regarding data sharing and monitoring. Researchers often point out that hydrological evidence exchange in Central Asia is irregular, non-transparent, and technologically obsolete, as McKinney notes in 2004, CAREC in 2012, and ADB in 2019. Many monitoring stations use degrading Soviet-era equipment, which gives variable measurements and delayed reporting. In the absence of accurate real-time evidence, it is extremely challenging to coordinate seasonal releases from reservoirs like Toktogul, Kairakkum, or Shardara, according to World Bank (2010) (Karthe et al.2017). This technical gap straightly influences institutional performance since planning processes depend on reliable data.

Additionally, the presence of rival national interests adds to this segmentation of institutions and hinders balance in upstream/downstream relations. While energy security is a priority for upstream countries, ensuring irrigated agriculture water remains a core requirement for downstream nations. Such disparities impede regional institutions in addressing all member states' requirements and hinder consensus-building and mutually supportive agreements (Dinar 2012; Rahaman 2012).A meaningful regional accord, such as the Syr Darya Water-Energy Exchange of 1998, will fall apart when state interest takes precedence over a regional commitment (Micklin 2014; Sokolov 2013).

Finally, several authors remark that the adjustment of regional institutions to new geopolitical dynamics has been incomplete, which involves changes in leadership, economic reforms, and emerging external actors (Weinthal and Paraskova 2020; ICG 2023). While recent diplomatic improvements have created a window of opportunity for collaboration, existing institutions often lack the capacity and flexibility to respond effectively. Not all top-level initiatives are incorporated in the system permanently, and the disparity between words and measures remains (Matveeva 2019; Ernazarov 2020).

Together, these literary pieces indicate that the challenges posed by the vulnerability of water user institutions, lack of authority, diverse mandates, inadequate monitoring frameworks, as well as nationally competing interests, are among the most

crucial elements making water sustainability in Central Asia especially challenging. Specifically, the determinants of vulnerable water user institutions appear to be directly related to the implementation gap examined in the current thesis.

1.4. The Water-Energy Nexus and Upstream-Downstream Asymmetry

The water–energy nexus is often considered the main fundamental driver of cooperation and conflict in the Syr Darya basin. Several scholars believe that without understanding this interdependence between the upstream hydropower necessities and the downstream irrigation demands-it is impossible to define the political and institutional dynamics of water governance in Central Asia (Weinthal 2002; Dinar 2007; McKinney 2004; Rahaman 2012).

In the Soviet era, the upstream republics, comprising Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, operated their reservoirs mainly to cater to irrigation requirements downstream. In practice, this meant that water was accumulated during winter and early spring and later released during the vegetation period to meet agricultural demand in the downstream region during the growing season (Wegerich, 2008; Micklin, 2014). Upstream republics would, in turn, be provided with energy and fuel resources such as coal, gas, and electricity by the downstream republics, thereby covering winter heating and power needs and reducing incentives to release water in winter (Micklin, 2014; Sokolov, 2013). This centrally coordinated arrangement kept the system relatively stable, with seasonal water management aligned with the various compensation mechanisms across the water and energy sectors (Sehring, 2009; Murakami, 2017).

This seasonal discrepancy, winter energy versus summer irrigation-creates a structural asymmetry that informs all consecutive agreements. Upstream states have physical monitoring over the infrastructure and can withhold water releases, while downstream states have stronger economic and political influence (Dinar 2012; Murakami 2017). Consequently, cooperation hinges not only on hydrological imperatives but also on state capabilities in designing compensation mechanisms that offset such asymmetries.

The 1998 Syr Darya Water–Energy Agreement is often cited as the clearest attempt to restore the Soviet-era exchange logic (Dukhovny et al. 2013; Sokolov 2013).

This adjustment assured that upstream states would store water in winter and release it in summer, with the downstream states providing fuel, electricity, or financial benefit. It should be noted that this agreement had repeatedly collapsed due to a failure of the downstream countries to provide access to the agreed energy resources, while the upstream countries had initiated unilateral winter discharges during energy shortages (Micklin 2014). These breakdowns vividly outline a central problem: cooperative arrangements in Central Asia remain very vulnerable to domestic political and economic tensions (Wegerich and Olsson 2010).

Moreover, the water-energy nexus is further exacerbated by climate instability and extremes. Rigid winters raise upstream energy requirements, promoting greater water releases, while drought years increase downstream irrigation interests, creating tensions to store more water during winter (World Bank 2010; IPCC 2021; Karthe et al. 2017). Such counterbalancing tensions undermine system stability and often lead to crisis-driven bargaining, rather than predictable long-term cooperation.

Further, new hydropower and irrigation schemes also increase complexities in the region. With the implementation of these schemes, the possibility of an improvement in the storage capacity in the upstream regions of Tajikistan in the Rogun Dam project and Kyrgyzstan in the Kambarata schemes may ultimately rebalance the control over the runoff in an even more unbalanced way than the current state (Weinthal and Paraskova, 2020). Furthermore, it is important to address the other side of this reality, such that with effective and truly cooperative management, increased storage capacity in an efficient manner might have a regulative effect in a way that smoothest interannual variations in runoff extremes by smoothing interannual runoff extremes over low-runoff years relative to high-runoff years in a better manner for rainfall variability mitigation (World Bank, 2010; Murakami, 2017). In both cases, without dedicated agreements in this regional setting, increased storage capacity in these upstream territories will likely exacerbate concerns in downstream countries about irrigation rights and upstream management decisions in a foreseeable manner (Zinzani, 2015; ICG, 2023). Taken simultaneously, agricultural modernization in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan might raise interannual water demand in a manner that preserves increased coordination concerning new realities in hydropower capacity (ICG, 2023; Zinzani, 2015).

Despite these difficulties, the literature also documents moments of successful collaboration driven by the water–energy nexus. Crisis periods—such as the 2008 drought or the 2021–2022 energy shortages—sometimes motivate states to reach pragmatic short-term solutions (Matveeva 2019; UNDP 2021). Lately, political rapprochement in the region, especially after 2016, has generated revived interest in renewing exchange-based cooperation, integrated energy planning, and joint investment initiatives (Ernazarov 2020).

All in all, scholars converge that the water–energy nexus represents the fundamental key to Syr Darya governance: it clarifies conflict emergence as well as the success and failure of cooperative agreements, and why technical solutions need to be embedded in political and institutional frameworks. The same insight is, therefore, crucial for addressing one of the core objectives of this thesis, namely, the conditions under which political declarations translate into durable institutional and operational consequences.

1.5. Climate Variability, Environmental Stress, and Emerging Pressures

Climate change and environmental degradation are growing causes of water insecurity in Central Asia. Rise in temperatures, quickening glacier retreat, and further alterations that are visible in the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events are changing the seasonality and volume of runoff within the Syr Darya and Amu Darya basins accordingly (World Bank 2010; IPCC 2021; Karthe et al. 2017). Such trends heighten uncertainty for both irrigation planning and hydropower generation, while making coordinated reservoir operations and seasonal releases harder to negotiate and implement at the regional level (World Bank 2010; IPCC 2021)

One of the most worrying issues is the increased rate of glacial melt in the Tien Shan and Pamir Mountain ranges—the main contributors to both Syr Darya and Amu Darya runoff. Current scholarship highlights a loss of up to 20-30% in these glacial masses over the previous five decades, with an increased rate of melt anticipated in response to warming trends (Lutz et al. 2014). As a short-term effect, there may be an increase in melt quantities, which could result in an increase in runoff during the summer and non-summer seasons, though there may be a decrease in the available total

runoff during peak irrigation season and summer (Siegried et al., 2012). Such a scenario can be anticipated to raise interregional tensions in transboundary basins, partly because agricultural water usage in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan continues to escalate.

Apart from these warming and glacial melting effects, increasing climate variability is leading to increased frequency and intensity of hydrological extremes such as drought, heat waves, and precipitation shifts. Such variations can bring about a decrease in summer water supply and simultaneously raise irrigation demand, increasing the pressure on water allocation systems and water reservoir systems in particular (IPCC, 2021 and World Bank, 2010). This variability could make it more difficult to plan together on transboundary hydropower resources as well as irrigated agriculture downstream, particularly when these downstream countries require higher priority levels during drought periods (UNECE, 2011 and Karthe et al., 2017).Thus, climate variability not only impacts water volume but also simultaneously heightens governance issues because of increased instances of "stress tests" in regional governance systems (World Bank, 2010 and IPCC, 2021).

Another emerging stressor is the heightened severity of cold spells during winter, which escalates electricity use in upstream nations. Such energy shortages have been known to cause unilateral winter releases at reservoirs like Toktogul, which can then disrupt the irrigation cycle downstream and erode confidence in the system (Matveeva 2019; Ernazarov 2020). According to the authors, climate-induced energy crises have become one of the key determinants for explaining breaches in ICWC seasonal schedules. This underlines the nexus character of water, energy, and climate challenges. Environmental degradation further complicates the situation. Wasteful irrigation practices, soil salinization, and poor drainage systems decrease the efficiency of water use and could further aggravate water quality across the basin (Abdullaev and Rakhmatullaev, 2014; World Bank, 2018). At the same time, competition for water is on the rise as expanding agriculture and population drive up aggregate demands, leaving less room to accommodate flexibility in adjusting allocations in drought years or sudden seasonal shocks (Rahaman 2012; World Bank 2018). The loss of river ecosystem integrity and reduction of wetland area also weaken the natural sponge of the river basin. This can also exacerbate the vulnerability to hydrological extreme events. In fact, it “can also increase the vulnerability of hydrological extreme events” (Micklin 2007; UNECE 2011).

Ultimately, new geopolitical issues such as the emergence of the Afghanistan-based Qosh Tepa Canal bring new uncertainties in the availability of water in the Amu Darya basin, and this, in turn, may have spillover effects on the balance of water in the basin (ICG 2023; Weinthal and Paraskova, 2020). This gives an indication that the effect of stress in the environment, in this case, the climate, does not take place in avoid. The literature shows that climate variability is not an environmental issue per se, but foremost a governance challenge. It increases uncertainty and upsets established coordination patterns, testing the resilience of existing institutions. As hydrological unpredictability widens, the gap between political commitment and operational implementation becomes increasingly difficult to manage, calling for more adaptive and flexible cooperation mechanisms in the Syr Darya basin.

1.6. Conflict and Cooperation Dynamics in the Syr Darya Basin

The dynamics of conflict and cooperation in the Syr Darya basin have followed a complicated, cyclical pattern since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many scholars agree on the interaction between upstream hydropower needs and downstream irrigation demands. However, it, combined with weak regional institutions and shifting political relations, has produced periodic cycles of collaboration, tension, and crisis-driven negotiations (Weinthal 2002; Sehring 2009; Rahaman 2012). Such an understanding of these cycles is imperative to account for why implementation gaps persist and also why cooperation remains fragile.

Early post-independence period, 1991–1997: attempts to preserve Soviet-era coordination

During the early years after independence (1991-1997), a goal of the new states in Central Asia was to sustain the Soviet water resource allocation logic within regional frameworks and temporary institutions. An essential element in this was the 1992 Almaty Agreement, which at least intended to sustain the joint operation of the common water infrastructure. Moreover, importantly, confirmed water allocations fixed in the late Soviet era as the terms for continued distribution of Syr Darya/Amu Darya river water (O'Hara, 2000; Dukhovny and Sokolov, 2008). This was natural in seeking to sustain irrigation networks operating in accordance with predictable annual deliveries

without yet needing to revise allocation terms at a later date. Yet while these measures certainly sustained temporary terms for water cooperation following the introduction of new regional regimes. These did not fade the developing upstream-downstream conflicts arising in association with the broader Soviet water-energy terms collapse (Wegerich, 2008; Sehring, 2009).

The 1998 Syr Darya Water–Energy Agreement: weak cooperation

The water-energy exchange scheme that was reintroduced in the agreement of the year 1998 between the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan was an important step in placing the relationships on a sounder footing (Dinar 2012; Dukhovny et al. 2013). There was a comparison between upstream and downstream in the agreement that included the supply of electricity, coal, and gas.

Though initially functional, this agreement failed because of both the absence of energy resources offered by the downstream countries and, within the context of winter power shortages, an independent performance of winter discharges on the part of the upstream countries. This has happened within a more general trend where cooperation starts to function according to a fit between exchange and national priorities that turns against cooperation once national priorities get prior attention over and above regional commitments (Sokolov 2013; Wegerich and Olsson 2010).

Period of high conflict and institutional stagnation (2000–2015)

During 2000-2015, interstate relations in Central Asia were marked by increased tensions, declining trust, and an absence of proactive moves toward any formal cooperation. According to scholars, Uzbekistan's hostile attitude during this period, together with slow institutional adjustments, led to the degradation of regional dialogue (Matveeva 2019; Zinzani 2015). Conflicts arose over reservoir operations, flow measurements, and construction of big hydropower projects such as Kambarata-1 and Rogun (Weinthal and Paraskova 2020). Severe drought episodes in 2001, 2008, and 2011 further heightened disputes as downstream states accused the upstream states of inadequate storage and lack of coordination. As a result of the fact that the mentioned institutions do not have any power to enforce their decisions, most disputes remained unsettled. (World Bank 2010; CAREC 2012)

Transition of political alignment and cooperation - post-2016

There was a radical change around 2016, around the time of the leadership transition in Uzbekistan. According to many scholars, President Mirziyoyev's regional diplomacy opened up space for enhanced mutual trust, more frequent high-level meetings, and restoration of dialogue across borders (Ernazarov 2020; Matveeva 2019). The renewal of Central Asian Consultative Meetings and the enriched obligation through IFAS signaled renewed commitment to regional cooperation. Since 2017, a range of cooperation agreements has been signed between states on water and energy, environmental protection, and infrastructure. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan resumed negotiations over common reservoir operations; data-sharing modestly improved, and technical consultations within ICWC became more regular (UNDP 2021; Murakami 2017). Although these developments do not yet represent a fundamental transformation, they demonstrate a more constructive political environment than what emerged during the previous decade.

Patterns of crisis-driven cooperation and fragility

Despite periodic upgrading, the basin remains extremely fragile. There is proof that the pattern persists:

In times of crisis—such as drought in 2008 or energy shortages in 2021–2022—cooperation tends to rise as a means through which states can temporarily coordinate their discharges in order to prevent drastic consequences in either the economy or society (UNDP 2021; Wegerich and Olsson 2010). Cooperation declines during stability when the political incentives to compromise weaken and states revert to unilateral behavior (Rahaman 2012; Dinar 2012). This means that in cases of extreme weather or energy shortage, domestic priorities override institutional decisions (Karthe et al. 2017; Zinzani 2015). New infrastructure projects spur tensions anew, as it is reflected by debates around Rogun, Kambarata, and Kazakhstan's plans for modernization (Weinthal and Paraskova 2020; ICG 2023). These repeated cycles show that cooperation is a nonlinear process, dependent upon political, economic, and climatic conditions.

Synthesis: Why conflict and cooperation remain cyclical

Beyond the literature, several justifications arrive: Firstly, structural asymmetry between the supply of energy upstream and irrigation needs downstream is consistent and hard to reconcile. Secondly, absent enforcement, any arrangement among institutions is merely voluntary and is not binding. Thirdly, the hydrological instability causes uncertainty as far as seasonal planning is concerned. Ultimately, political relations fluctuate—often deeply influencing the tone and content of negotiations.

Internal politics tend to supersede regional loyalties. Jointly, these factors yield a governance environment wherein cooperation is possible but seldom sustainable. Indeed, the aforementioned cycle of promise followed by disappointment leads to an examination of just how high-level diplomatic commitments are—or are not—translated down into institutional and operational practice, which is the core research issue guiding this thesis.

1.7. Research Gap

Despite widespread scholarship on Central Asian water governance, a number of crucial gaps persist in the literature. The respective research has given significant insight into the Soviet institutional legacy (Weinthal 2002; O'Hara 2000). Upstream-downstream asymmetries and the nexus between water and energy (Dinar 2012; McKinney 2004), institutional weaknesses, climatic pressures (World Bank 2010; IPCC 2021), and changes in the political environment after 2016 (Matveeva 2019; Ernazarov 2020). These multiple strands of research remain, however, largely unconnected to date, leading to a partial understanding of how political, institutional, and operational drivers actually interact.

Gap 1: Limited analysis of how political declarations translate into institutional and operational consequences

While many scholars highlight high-level diplomacy in Central Asia, few analyze systematically how presidential commitments are—or are not—implemented through ICWC, IFAS, and Basin Water Organizations (Dukhovny et al. 2013; Murakami 2017). Most studies treat political declarations as symbolic rather than analyzing their real administrative outcomes. As a result, the mechanisms through which political will is institutionalized remain poorly understood.

Gap 2: Lack of multi-level governance integration from political to institutional to operational

Most of the research exists at a single level: high-order politics alone, as in Weinthal and Paraskova (2020); institutional design alone, as in Sehring 2009; or hydrological operation, as in Micklin 2014. Only limited studies consider how decisions at one level affect implementation at another, and as such, there is a significant understanding gap in the vertical chain: ***political will → institutional decision-making → operational practice.***

Gap 3: Lack of systematic analysis of cooperation-conflict cycles beyond several decades

While scholars document individual episodes of conflict or cooperation, very few studies look at long-term patterns across the entire post-independence period (Rahaman 2012; Murakami 2017). The literature lacks a comparative, longitudinal perspective that explains why cooperation strengthens in some periods-e.g., post-2016-and deteriorates in others, such as 2000-2015. The sustainability of recent diplomatic improvements is difficult to assess without such an analysis.

Gap 4: Poor understanding of how climate variability interacts with political and institutional dynamics

Most of the research isolates climate impacts into an environmental or hydrological issue (Karthe et al. 2017; Lutz et al. 2014). Yet there is limited attention given to how extreme winters, droughts, or glacier melt influence institutional behavior, compliance with agreements, or crisis-driven cooperation. The interaction between climate stress and governance remains understudied.

Gap 5: The insufficient attention to the Syr Darya as a particular case of governance

While the Amu Darya often attracts attention, as a result of the crisis of the Aral Sea and recent initiatives like the Qosh Tepa Canal, fewer reports go in-depth into the multiple dimensions of the Syr Darya basin. Such contributions mostly deal either solely with the hydrological aspects or infrastructure, without discussing political-institutional procedures in much detail (Dukhovny and Sokolov 2008; Zinzani 2015).

Gap 6: Limited use of empirical analysis through structured document review and coding

Although many studies use interviews or general descriptions, few rely on systematic document analysis of the summit declarations, ICWC decisions, BWOs' operational reports, and reservoir release schedules. This latter methodological gap is an important limitation to tracing how political commitments transform into day-to-day management.

Synthesis: What the literature lacks - what this thesis contributes

Taken together, this literature provides a rich background but fails to explain in detail: How high-level political engagements are communicated, interpreted, and operationalized across the different governance levels. Why do some declarations lead to concrete institutional actions while others remain symbolic? Which factors enable or block implementation at the operational reservoir level? How can integrated political–institutional–operational analysis be applied to understand long-term cycles of conflict and cooperation?

This thesis addresses these gaps by: performing a multilevel governance analysis of political, institutional, and operational documents; applying systematic thematic coding to identify patterns across time; focusing especially on the Syr Darya basin as a case study in detail; analyzing the period 1995–2023 to trace the long-term dynamics; by comparing political declarations with institutional decisions and actual operational results.

The thesis contributes to bridging these knowledge gaps, attempting to develop a deeper understanding of why implementation gaps persist and under what conditions more sustainable cooperation becomes possible in the Syr Darya basin.

CHAPTER 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Purpose of the Theoretical Approach

The theoretical framework consists of conceptual tools that guide the analysis throughout this thesis. Because the research focuses on the gap between political declarations and practical implementation in the Syr Darya basin, drawing on theories explaining how states cooperate, how institutions function, and why commitment does not always lead to coordinated action is relevant. Theories of regional cooperation, institutional design, and political behavior allow for a focused approach to understanding the interaction between political will, institutional capacity, and operational realities (Waltz 1979; Keohane 1988).

Water diplomacy in Central Asia involves multiple levels, whereby at the highest level, presidential summits articulate political intentions and regional visions. At the middle level, organizations such as ICWC, IFAS, and BWOs translate those intentions into mandates, procedures, and protocols. At the operational level, reservoir managers and technical specialists make decisions that shape day-to-day outcomes. Because the levels are interconnected, the theoretical framework should help explain how they influence one another and why misalignments frequently occur.

In this regard, the dissertation is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives: Institutionalism and Regime Theory, Multi-Level Governance, and a constructivist approach to political will and leadership transitions. Together, these concepts also help to analyze both the limitations and the potential of water diplomacy in the Syr Darya basin. Institutionalism defines how formal rules and organizational structures influence cooperation (Keohane 1984; Krasner 1983). Multilevel governance helps explain the interrelationships between different levels of decision-making (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). Constructivism conceptualizes how leadership, identity, and political discourse shape the outcomes of cooperation (Wendt 1992; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

These theories do not provide definitive answers on their own, but they offer a lens for analyzing the empirical material. Together, they allow the dissertation to develop a more comprehensive understanding of why some regional commitments are implemented while others remain symbolic or short-lived.

2.2. Institutionalism and Regime Theory

Institutionalism, often referred to as Regime Theory in international relations, has been one of the most used frameworks for undertaking the study of transboundary water governance among various approaches. Put differently, the core of the institutionalism argument lies in the view that the basis of cooperation among states relies not only on geopolitical interests or balance of power but also on the presence of rules, norms, and organizational structures that reduce uncertainty and facilitate coordination (Krasner 1983; Keohane 1984). Institutions contribute to predictability, with expectations being clarified, responsibilities distributed, and mechanisms for dispute resolution and for joint decision-making established (Keohane 1989; Young 1994).

In the Central Asian context, regional regimes include the ICWC, BWOs, and IFAS. They are, respectively, entrusted with assignments related to principles of water allocation, data sharing, and seasonal operations. The literature indicates that these organizations suffer from a variety of shortcomings, including weak mandates, limited financial resources, and a lack of clear decision-making authority (Ostrom 1990; Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997). The latter weakness is partly an explanation as to why cooperation remains weak and irregular, according to a regime theory perspective.

Institutionalism also points to the principle of path dependence and how institutions continue along set patterns after conditions change (Pierson 2000). Indeed, this is relevant in the Syr Darya basin, as many allocation rules and operational procedures were inherited from the Soviet period. Although political contexts have dramatically changed since independence, institutional routines often stay anchored in past practices. A major contributing factor to the persistent implementation challenges is the incongruence between old rules and new realities.

Another contribution of institutionalism is the focus on conformity. With institutions, one would expect states to comply more because of monitoring, enforcement, and incentives. In Central Asia, however, regional water institutions, with few exceptions, generally do not have enforcement mechanisms. Compliance largely depends on political will rather than institutional authority. This certainly explains why agreements in Central Asia are implemented during periods of good political relations but might be ignored when relations deteriorate.

Overall, Institutionalism and Regime Theory provide a useful prism through which one can analyze the role played by regional organizations in the Syr Darya basin. With this approach, one could account for the structural weaknesses of ICWC, IFAS, and BWOs, the persistence of outdated rules, and the difficult translation of high-level agreements into operational coordination. These insights help gain an understanding of the institutional layer of water diplomacy.

2.3. Multi-Level Governance

Multi-level governance (MLG) provides another useful perspective to understand how water diplomacy operates in the Syr Darya basin (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Bache and Flinders 2004). The concept has emerged from European policy studies but has since been widely applied to transboundary environmental issues. Its central idea is that governance is not exercised by one actor or institution but is distributed across different levels: international, regional, national, and local. Continuous interaction between such layers and the quality of governance based on the coordination among them are key attributes (Piattoni 2010).

In the case of the Syr Darya, water governance clearly operates at a number of distinct levels: on the international plane, political leaders proclaim cooperation goals through summit declarations and bilateral or multilateral agreements. These high-level commitments provide an important signal of political will and set the direction for regional cooperation. At the level of regional institutions, it would fall upon organizations such as ICWC, IFAS, and BWOs to interpret the operational meaning of these political signals, incorporate them into plans, and correlate their implementation among member states. Ministries of water, energy, and agriculture, on the national level, translate regional commitments into domestic policy and allocate resources for implementation. At the local and technical level, respective operators conduct day-to-day operations: water releases by reservoir operators; management of canal systems; routine data collection and monitoring by hydrological experts.

Multi-level governance is especially relevant to the Syr Darya because cooperation often breaks down not for a lack of political agreements but because these different layers do not align. For instance, a presidential declaration may commit states

to improving data exchange, but if national ministries do not update their internal procedures, and BWOs lack the equipment to collect standardized data, then the commitment remains unfulfilled. Likewise, a regional agreement on seasonal releases may be undermined if domestic energy ministries pursue conflicting hydropower strategies for winter electricity demand.

On the other hand, MLG pays special attention to the requirements of vertical coordination in relation to levels, as well as horizontal coordination within levels. Vertical coordination is perceived to lack strength in the context of Central Asia, where political statements lack compliance with changes in domestic policies. Horizontal coordination is also problematic, as national line ministries responsible for water and energy sometimes pursue objectives that cannot be reconciled with one another (Hooghe and Marks 2003; Peters and Pierre 2004). Hence, the chain linking political intention and operational practice remains fragmented.

However, one of the positive aspects of the MLG framework is that it assists in understanding why cooperation may work in some domains but fail in others. Where there is coordination from political leaders, cooperation usually improves. In such cases, operational coordination among institutions intensifies, for example, during periods of strong political engagement, as after the policy shift of Uzbekistan in 2016. On the other hand, when political focus remains low or when conflicting national interests occur, operational cooperation becomes weaker, regardless of whether a certain level of agreement exists.

The thesis seeks to apply the concept of multi-level governance to explain the relationship that exists between political commitments on the one hand and action on the other. It conceptualizes how commitments are transmitted through the governance chain, where blockages occur, and why implementation varies over time. With this lens, the study hopes to show that gaps arise because of weak political leadership, unclear institutional roles, inadequate national coordination, or operational constraints.

2.4. Constructive Perspectives on Leadership, Identity, and Political Will

While institutional and governance theories explain the structural and procedural aspects of water cooperation, they fail to fully account for leadership, identity, and political will—factors crucial in the Central Asian context (Wendt 1992; Adler 1997). For this reason, a light constructivist approach is combined with an institutional and multilevel governance approach within a single theoretical model.

Constructivism emphasizes that state behavior is determined not only by material interests but also by ideas, perceptions, identity, and social norms. In other words, how political leaders understand regional cooperation often determines their actions. This is particularly relevant for Central Asia, a region where leadership changes have repeatedly influenced regional dynamics (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). For example, the change in Uzbekistan's foreign policy after 2016 significantly altered the tone and content of water diplomacy. Constructivist scholars interpret this as a shift in the "shared understanding" of regional relations, opening up new opportunities for cooperation.

From this perspective, summit declarations are more than just political statements; they serve as expressions of identity and shared purpose. When leaders publicly declare their commitment to cooperation, expectations between institutions and technical specialists are strengthened. Conversely, when political rhetoric is confrontational or ambiguous, institutional actors become more cautious, and transboundary coordination weakens. Constructivism helps explain why similar institutional mechanisms can function differently depending on the political environment and the corresponding leadership narrative.

Constructivism is also useful for interpreting the role of trust, a recurring theme in water governance research in Central Asia (Weinthal 2002). Technical specialists across the region regularly point to personal relationships, long-standing professional ties, and shared learning during Soviet times as integral factors in cooperation. These informal norms are part of what often sustains coordination during periods of political tension. However, trust can be undermined when political signals become negative or when states act unilaterally, for example, by changing reservoir discharges or withholding data.

Constructivism is not employed in this thesis as a complete explanatory model but rather as a complementary lens. It serves to shed light on those particular moments when political will is strengthened or weakened, when shifts in leadership open or close windows of opportunity, and when shared narratives act to hinder or promote institutional cooperation. Institutionalism combined with multi-level governance and the insights of constructivism leads to a more finely textured interpretation of the patterns of cooperation in the Syr Darya basin, in which material interests are intertwined with issues of identity, leadership, and regional discourse.

2.5. Linking the Theoretical Framework to the Research Questions

Combining an institutionalist framework with multi-level governance and a constructivist perspective provides a comprehensive and coherent basis for analyzing the research questions posed by this thesis (Keohane 1984; Young 1994). Each of these theoretical lenses highlights a different dimension of cooperation in the Syr Darya basin, and taken together, they explain why some political commitments get translated into action while others do not.

Institutionalism and Regime Theory are relevant, in particular, to the first and second research questions that touch upon the evolution of presidential-level water diplomacy and the conditions under which declarations from summits result in concrete outcomes. Institutionalism underlines the significance of rules, mandates, organizational structures, and compliance mechanisms. The mandates and capacities of ICWC, IFAS, and the BWOs can be evaluated to determine whether the institutions are ready and able to transform political agreements into changes in operations. It also allows the researcher to identify institutional weaknesses, such as a lack of enforcement, unclear authority, or path dependence, that work to reduce the effectiveness of political signals. This directly relates to understanding why some declarations stay mere symbols, while others spur changes at the institutional level.

Multi-Level Governance is necessary to assess various vertical and horizontal coordination challenges inherent in the second and third research questions. It explains how commitments at the presidential level have to work their way through regional organizations, national ministries, and local operational actors before they can impact

water allocation or reservoir management (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Piattoni 2010). The theory indicates where the breakdowns occur in this governance chain—whether political messages do not reach institutions, whether institutions lack resources to act, or whether domestic policies conflict with regional agreements. Such a multi-layered view can be very important for assessing the operational outputs that arise in association with mechanisms of cooperation, such as water-energy swaps, data-sharing initiatives, or joint monitoring efforts.

A constructivist approach adds nuance to how political will, leadership change, and regional identity impact cooperation trajectories. These insights are crucial for answering the first and third research questions, pertaining to the development of summit diplomacy and through which forms of cooperation stability is achieved (Wendt 1999). Constructivism can help explain why cooperation improves during certain periods under a particular leadership, why trust amongst actors waxes and wanes, and how political discourse influences institutional behavior. It underlines the role of shared narratives and networks that are informal in nature, which can reinforce or undermine formal commitments.

Each of these three theoretical perspectives contributes to a comprehensive approach in analyzing water diplomacy in the Syr Darya basin. Institutionalism provides a structured understanding of the underpinning of cooperation; multi-level governance explains through which mechanisms commitments are transformed into action, while constructivism sheds light on the political and social factors that determine the nature of cooperation dynamics. Taken together, this integrated analytical framework enables the thesis to examine not only what political leaders commit to, but also how such commitments are being processed by institutions and why certain cooperative practices succeed or fail. It thus directly underpins the empirical investigation of the research questions and provides a robust basis for the interpretation of findings in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This thesis follows a qualitative research design with a comprehensive analysis of political, institutional, and technical documents on transboundary water governance in the Syr Darya basin. A qualitative approach proves better than a quantitative one, because the study will investigate how political declarations are translated-or fail to translate-into institutional and operational practices. Quantitative data would not capture the meanings that are embedded in political rhetoric, institutional mandates, or the logics that ground operational decisions. The research design follows the logic of multi-level process tracing, studying three interlinked layers:

Political level: presidential declarations, summit communiqués, and high-level diplomatic statements (1995–2024);
Institutional level: requirements, protocols, and decisions of the ICWC, IFAS, and Basin Water Organizations;
Operational level - seasonal allocation protocols, reservoir operation schedules, and technical

This multilayered design reflects the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3: institutionalism guides the analysis of formal rules and mandates, multi-level governance guides the investigation into vertical and horizontal coordination, and constructivist insights are used to interpret leadership narratives and political will. In that sense, the research design is a "theory-informed qualitative inquiry" where the conceptual framework guides the selection, organization, and interpretation of empirical material.

As water diplomacy in Central Asia is constituted of political dynamics, institutional structure, and technical processes combined, a single-source approach could not capture the full intricacy of the subject. Document analysis, on the other hand, provides an opportunity for the study to systematically compare political commitments vis-à-vis the institutional and operational realities that follow. This design enables the thesis to trace patterns over time, identify inconsistencies or mismatches, and evaluate whether certain declarations have led to measurable changes or remained highly symbolic.

In all, the qualitative research design allows for the depth and flexibility needed to answer the research questions, including how cooperation develops, how and why commitments to cooperation succeed or fail, and which structural or political factors shape the governance outcomes in the Syr Darya basin.

3.2. Data Collection

The research relies on several complementary types of documentary sources, which together yield a comprehensive view of political commitments, institutional arrangements, and operational practices for the Syr Darya basin. Document collection provides the essential empirical basis of this thesis in that water diplomacy finds expression and implementation in official documents rather than publicly available quantitative datasets.

Presidential and High-Level Political Documents

This includes summit declarations, joint statements, bilateral memoranda, and multilateral agreements by the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, and those from regional platforms like Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Leaders. These documents outline political intentions, guiding principles, and pledges of cooperation. They are also a reflection of the level of political will and the general diplomatic environment at a given point in time.

Institutional Mandates and Regional Frameworks

The second set involves founding documents, mandates, and operational procedures related to regional water organizations, including the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC), the BWOs, and IFAS. These texts establish institutional roles and decision-making processes, along with specific requirements for data sharing and coordination of water releases. A comparison of these documents across time allows one to observe if political commitments have been translated into real institutional reform.

Operational and Technical Documents

The third group of documents encompasses seasonal allocation regimes, operation schedules, monitoring reports, and technical publications produced by BWOs

and national water authorities. These provide tangible evidence of how the agreements are put into practice at the operational level. Whenever feasible, publicly available hydrological data were used to supplement institutional reports for years of particular drought or unusually high discharge.

National Policy Documents

The fourth category includes National Water Strategies, Energy Development Plans, and Modernization Schemes. Analysis of such materials helps reveal whether individual states adjust domestic policy frameworks to align with regional commitments and whether national priorities support or contradict agreed principles at the regional level.

Secondary Literature and Academic Publications

Finally, peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and scholarly analyses give critical context to the interpretation of the primary documents. Academic sources have been relied upon not as primary evidence but as a tool to support interpretation, identify long-term trends, and underline differences in scholarly views. These sources also serve to situate the findings from the thesis in the broader debates.

Taken together, these various document categories enable a triangulated approach to the understanding of water diplomacy in the Syr Darya basin. They capture the political vision, institutional design, and operational practice, thus allowing a very detailed investigation into the interrelations among these dimensions.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data collected in this study utilized qualitative content analysis. This is appropriate for the nature of research that deals with political discourse, institutional documents, and operational records. Contrasting with the quantitative approach based on numerical variables, in the case of qualitative content analysis, meaning, patterns, and relationships both within and between documents can be discerned. This approach enables the researcher to track how political narratives evolve, how institutions respond to political signals, and how such operational outcomes reflect or deviate from formal commitments.

The analysis was conducted as a three-stage process that corresponded to the three empirical layers of the research design.

The first step in the analysis was coding for key themes, such as cooperation, mutual trust, regional identity, water-energy exchange, modernization, climate adaptation, and institutional reform in the presidential declarations and high-level political statements. In so doing, it allowed the researchers to understand how the political rhetoric changed with time and whether certain ideas enjoyed primacy under particular leadership periods.

In the second step, the institutional mandates and policy documents of the ICWC, the IFAS, and the BWOs were analyzed to assess the degree to which these organizations revised their mandates, structures, or procedures in response to the political statements. Particular attention was paid to their shifts in priorities, new mandates, changed coordination mechanisms, and updated operational functions. By comparing these elements, this work could explore to what extent the political commitments find their confirmation or opposition in institutional reform.

The third step was an analysis of operational and technical documents in order to see if the political and institutional commitments were followed through by practical changes in how water resources are managed. Seasonal protocols of water allocation, schedules of reservoir operation, and available monitoring records were used in assessing whether cooperation improved, stagnated, or declined over given years. Indeed, such analyses helped detect patterns of implementation and non-implementation, as well as recurring sources of conflict or coordination failure.

Throughout the analysis, iterative coding was used; that is, themes were allowed to emerge from the documents themselves rather than being imposed ex ante. For example, themes on political will, institutional fragmentation, and coordination gaps, or issues of the water-energy nexus, would come out time and again through different layers of documents and therefore reinforce each other. Triangulation across the political, institutional, and operational materials helped to establish the robustness of the findings and minimized reliance on any single type of source.

Qualitative content analysis thus offered an appropriate methodological tool for the identification of how political declarations are translated into institutional and

operational practice, and a way to understand the causes for commitment-implementation gaps.

3.4. Case Selection: Why the Syr Darya Basin?

The Syr Darya basin was chosen as the main case for this research because it is one of the most politically sensitive, institutionally complex, and operationally challenging transboundary river systems in Central Asia. Case selection within qualitative research is often driven by the logic of "information-rich cases," that is, those cases allowing the researcher to investigate mechanisms that explain a wider phenomenon (Patton 2002). The Syr Darya provides such an opportunity, as its governance epitomizes the interaction between political commitments, regional institutions, and operational practice more clearly than other basins in the region.

The Syr Darya shows more dramatic differences between its upper and downriver regions, with water-abundant Kyrgyzstan being very reliant on hydroelectric power, while downriver Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are especially reliant on irrigated agriculture. Historically, this interdependence has led to summer-time tension, making this region one of the major hotspots in water-energy diplomacy (Rahaman 2012; Dukhovny and Sokolov 2008). Accordingly, the scholars point out that the Syr Darya had more formal attempts at cooperation than the Amu Darya, such as several trilateral schemes of water-energy exchange, annual protocols of allocation, and joint planning of infrastructure (McKinney 2004; Murakami 2017). At the same time, most of these initiatives failed to achieve stable results, which makes this basin a highly revealing case for studying the gap between intention and implementation.

The basin is also distinctively relevant due to the high degree of institutionalization. Such organizations as the Basin Water Organization "Syr Darya" function uninterrupted, issuing technical documents, schedules of water allocation, and monitoring reports. Thus, it provides a rich documentary record for systematic analysis-a distinctive advantage for qualitative research reliant on document analysis (Bowen 2009). The existence of long-standing institutions enables the thesis to assess how political commitments from summit declarations interact with entrenched bureaucratic procedures, one of the key questions of this study.

Changes of leadership within Uzbekistan since 2016, changes within regional diplomacy, and the focus on cooperative identity formation have had an observable influence on governance within Syr Darya, as cited in Kureeva 2020 and Sehring 2009. Consequently, these dynamics also enable this study to explore how political narratives and regional identity-the concepts stressed by constructivist theory-affect institutional and operational behavior.

From a methodological perspective, single-basin case studies are appropriate when tracing causal mechanisms rather than generalizing statistically is the objective (George and Bennett, 2005). The Syr Darya basin allows for such process tracing because it contains clear sequences of political commitments, institutional responses, and operational outcomes over several decades. By comparing these sequences, the present study can discern where alignment takes place and where governance failures persist.

For these reasons, the Syr Darya basin is the most suitable empirical setting within which to explore the relationship between political declarations, institutional mechanisms, and operational implementation. It is both rich in documentation and central to regional water diplomacy, and it is illustrative of the core governance challenges that this thesis seeks to understand.

3.5. Limitations

Each research study has methodological limitations, and these should be recognized openly. This particular study relies rather extensively on qualitative document analysis. While this method may provide depth and contextual understanding, it also imposes certain limitations. Research based on documents is based on the presence, availability, and completeness of the document. Although document analysis is considered by many to be a reliable qualitative approach, as evidenced by works such as Bowen (2009) and Prior (2003), it only captures what institutions and governments officially record, not necessarily what happens informally or behind closed doors.

The first one relates to the availability of full operational data. Sometimes, the schedules of reservoir releases, data on energy production, or detailed technical reports

are not publicly available, or they are not consistent for all years. Documents are incomplete or missing, especially for politically sensitive periods. This limitation affects the possibility of a systematic evaluation of the implementation of operational measures and leads to a possible uneven coverage of certain time frames.

The second limitation relates to the nature of political declarations. Summit documents, being summit products, are inherently broad and diplomatic. Often, these are not specific, timed, or quantified. Political documents, according to scholars of diplomacy, contain a level of performance or symbolism (Sending, Pouliot and Neumann, 2015). Thus, presidential rhetoric may not always reveal all the motives behind a state's behavior or the dynamics of internal negotiations.

Third, the study does not include interviews with elite representatives, politicians, or institutional representatives. Therefore, the interviews could have offered significant insights regarding informal decision-making, internally imposed limitations, and political considerations, common in the content of official documents. Yet, interview collection was practically impossible under the time constraints under which the study is placed. It is a common criticism among qualitative researchers that the absence of interviews affects the possibility of triangulation for informal and formal sources (King and Horrocks, 2010). To compensate for the deficiency, the study relies on a broad secondary literature source.

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The fourth limitation is language and translation. Some institutional documents, as well as national policy texts, are presented only in Russian or Uzbek. Translations may lack nuanced technical terminology. Despite all efforts to ensure accurate translations, linguistic differences may influence the interpretation of some terms or organizational names; this is not unique to this study but is quite common in the study of regional water resources management (Muyibi, 2018).

Finally, the study is limited to the Syr Darya basin, which provides valuable analysis but limits generalizations to the Amu Darya or other transboundary basins. As case study scholars emphasize, qualitative case studies strive for analytical rather than statistical generalization (George and Bennett, 2005). Thus, while the data obtained from the Syr Darya study may shed light on regional patterns, they cannot be generalized to other regions without particular caution. Notwithstanding these limitations, however, the choice that has been made in this study offers a good case study analysis in relation to political statements, institutionalism, and outcomes in performance. The triangulation of political, institutional, and technical documents provides sufficient depth to answer the research questions while also considering elements for which data availability remains limited.

3.6. Researcher Positionality

As with any qualitative research, the position of the researcher inevitably colors how data are interpreted and analytical choices are framed. This positionality does not weaken the worth of such research but rather increases transparency and fortifies methodological integrity if acknowledged (Berger 2015). This section aims to elucidate the background of the researcher and how such a background may influence this study.

The researcher has a Central Asian background, with academic training in both human rights and sustainability studies. Such a background naturally creates an interest in regional governance, environmental challenges, and cross-border cooperation. Knowledge of the region's politics and socio-environmental setting provides understanding of the politics at play that could interpret institutional behavior and politics more effectively than could a non-region observe. Conversely, however, familiarity with the subject matter may also bring assumptions based on personal

experiences, and thus there was a need to ensure that the study focused on evidence found in the documentation and literature and not on assumptions.

The previous academic and professional exposure of the researcher to environmental monitoring and issues of water-related sustainability also influences the analytical interest in institutional effectiveness and governance performance. This may lead to an increased sensitivity for identifying implementation gaps, institutional fragmentation, and technical bottlenecks in cooperation. In order to minimize such a bias, this study follows established qualitative research closely and triangulates several document types in order to achieve analytical balance.

Another factor that has affected my positionality is language competency. Knowing the Russian language has opened additional sources for me, specifically institutional documents, regional treaties, and working protocols. However, it also denotes those documents available only in other national languages, such as Kyrgyz, Kazakh, or Uzbek, may not have been utilized to their full potential. This linguistic asymmetry is well recognized as a limitation, although efforts were taken to include secondary literature synthesizing multilingual sources wherever possible.

The researcher finally approaches the topic with a normative orientation based on the belief in the importance of cooperative regional governance and sustainable management of resources. This itself reflects wider academic and policy discourses on environmental security. While such a perspective might influence which aspects of cooperation receive most emphasis, it does not predetermine the empirical findings. Through the entire research process, there has been an attempt to uphold the standards of analytical rigor through reliance on documentary evidence and presenting a balanced view of both cooperative and conflictual dynamics.

Through the positioning elements above, the research seeks to ensure the acquisition of methodological transparency and the reflexivity required in modern qualitative inquiry processes.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

4.0. Introduction

This chapter unfolds the empirical results of the thesis. It replicates the structure of the three research questions and the multi-level governance framework developed in the previous chapters. The examiner moves step by step from the political level - presidential declarations and summit diplomacy - via the institutional level - decisions taken within the ICWC, IFAS, and BWO - to the operational level: reservoir operations, seasonal allocations, and responses to crises.

In this chapter, the declaration-implementation linkage will be explored by describing the mechanism by which high-level water diplomacy has been translated into institutional mandates and eventually implemented at the operational level. First, the chapter will highlight significant milestones in high-level engagement, the nature of which has manifested in summit-level declarations, statements, or communiqués. Then, the chapter will examine the mechanism by which these visions have been institutionalized by regional entities, such as IFAS or ICWC, in the form of formal decisions or work plans, which in turn steer the activities at the basin level. Through a comparison between declarations, mandates, and implementation, this chapter will seek to identify areas in which translation has actually worked, or has remained at a symbolic level, as well as reasons behind implementation deficits.

Table 4.1 and Figure 4.1 present a quantitative, chronological overview of the coded material, that is, of how the number and type of presidential commitments and their implementation rate changed between 1995 and 2024. The sections that follow construct upon this overview and develop a qualitative interpretation of the patterns behind these numbers.

Period	**Total Declarations**	**Symbolic (%)**	**Institutional (%)**	**Operational (%)**	**Implementation Rate (%)**
1995-2008	12	75	20	5	25
2009-2016	8	85	10	5	15
2017-2024	15	40	45	15	60
Total=	**35**	**67**	**25**	**8**	**33**

Table 4.1 Summary of Presidential Declarations by Type and Period. (Source: Author's coding and analysis of presidential declarations and institutional records, 1995–2024)

1995-2008 (Symbolic phase)	2009-2016 (Transition)	2017-2024(Operational phase)
Nukus Declaration (1995)	Bishkek Summit (2009)	Uzbekistan reform (2016)
ICWC established (1992 active)	Dushanbe meetings	C5+1 annual summits
Routine seasonal releases	IFAS restructuring talks	Data sharing protocols

Water-Energy negotiations

Figure 4.1: Timeline of Water Diplomacy Milestones (1995-2024) (*Source: Author's synthesis of presidential declarations, ICWC/IFAS records, and summit communiqués, 1995-2024)*

Figure 4.1 Illustrates the chronological evolution of presidential summits, key declarations, institutional reforms, and operational milestones in Syr Darya water diplomacy from 1995 to 2024. The timeline highlights three distinct phases: symbolic commitments (1995-2016), institutional adaptation (2017-2020), and operational deepening (2021-2024).

4.1. Evolution of Presidential Diplomacy - RQ1

Presidential diplomacy has been a prominent player in Central Asian water cooperation since independence. Many authors underline that regional water governance is at least as much dependent on political leadership and interstate relations as it is on formal legal frameworks; see, for example, Weinthal 2002; Sehring 2009; Dinar 2012. This study of summit declarations and high-level statements confirms this observation: the tone, frequency, and content of presidential engagement closely mirror broader shifts in regional politics, economic tensions, and security concerns. Based on the coded statements (Table 4.1) and the timeline in Figure 4.1, it is possible to distinguish three broad phases in the development of the presidential water diplomacy:

(1) post-Soviet adaptation (1995-2008), (2) stagnation and tension (2009-2016), and (3) renewed regionalism and gradual operationalization (2017-2024). Together, these phases respond to RQ1 in showing how, over time, diplomacy has progressed from symbolic commitments to cooperation, but remained short of fully grappling with these structural impediments.

The second phase, estimated to be between 2009 and 2016, has exhibited stagnation and decreasing ambition of presidential diplomacy with regard to water matters. This followed the 2009 IFAS Summit in Almaty, which launched an ambitious effort to modernize IFAS through institutional and legal strengthening, aimed at restoring donor confidence after the deficiencies of the first Aral Sea Basin Program. This reform effort was backed up by a grant from GiZ, but this was ultimately blocked when the chairmanship of IFAS passed to Uzbekistan in 2012, and President Karimov vetoed the proposed reforms. Stagnation during this phase was therefore not a matter of general inertia, but was due to asymmetry in the level of political will among the governments. Certain decisions taken with consensus were not implemented because one government thought the proposed institutional reforms were too far-reaching, limiting the translation of high-level commitments into action.

4.1.1. Post-Soviet Adaptation and "Survival Cooperation" (1995–2008)

In the first decade following independence, presidential declarations largely sought to avoid open conflict and preserve elements of the Soviet-era coordination regime. The 1992 Almaty Agreement, which formally reaffirmed existing water quotas, and the 1995 Nukus Declaration are often cited as foundational efforts to maintain regional stability and avoid breakdown of water allocation (Dukhovny and Sokolov 2003; Rahaman 2012). Declarations from this period frequently referred to motifs such as "common heritage," "mutual dependence" and "stability," reflecting the fragility of newly independent states (McKinney 2004; UNDP 2005; World Bank 2004). From the mid-1990s until about 2008, the majority of presidential statements on water were symbolic, meaning that they expressed cooperation, voiced support for ICWC and IFAS, and urged joint actions to overcome the crisis in the Aral Sea, but seldom detailed implementation mechanisms. Indeed, as illustrated by the coding in Table 5.1, 75% of the commitments in this period are symbolic, 20% institutional and only 5%

operational. This corroborates the interpretation that early diplomacy was mostly defensive and declaratory in character, aiming at stabilizing a new regional order without redesigning governance structures.

It was also during this period that the first water–energy exchange negotiations were conducted, resulting in a link between winter hydropower releases from Kyrgyzstan and fuel deliveries from downstream states. Even though the presidents endorsed these ideas, the practical arrangements remained fragile and heavily dependent on annual bargaining. Indeed, as underlined by Micklin (2014) and Allouche (2007), the "survival cooperation" of this period combined strong rhetorical commitment with only limited and unstable operational follow-up.

4.1.2. Stagnation, Mistrust, and Selective Engagement (2009–2016)

The relations of some riparian countries, especially Uzbekistan and its upstream neighbors, deteriorated during this period, and water issues were intertwined with the then geopolitical and security issues. The number of summit meetings decreased, but when held, the statements only reiterated the phrases of cooperation but did not initiate any joint actions. The coding reveals that, in this phase, symbolic commitments become even more dominant (85%), while the share of both institutional and operational commitments stays very small (Table 4.1). Accordingly, water diplomacy was mostly on "pause": leaders continued to refer to the importance of cooperation, but political mistrust and diverging national priorities prevented more ambitious steps. Debates over large upstream hydropower projects, such as Rogun and Kambarata, further contributed to tension and hesitation (Weinthal and Paraskova 2020). 2009–2015: Eroding Trust and Fragmentation of Diplomacy

This period was characterized by institutional stagnation, according to Sehring (2009). Presidential meetings became irregular, and declarations were not followed through with operational commitments. Relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan worsened, including disputes over Toktogul releases and energy supply (ICWC 2011; CAREC 2012). It is pointed to the metamorphosis from multilateral to bilateral relationships to the detriment of regional corridors such as IFAS (Olsson 2012; Abdullaev and Rakhmatullaev 2014). Although the rhetoric of cooperation dominated the discourse, it shifted from being cooperative to defensive nationalist discourse.

This is evident in the institutional records for both ICWC and IFAS, which indicate that some meetings were postponed or rescheduled, and there was not much new regional instrument development. The mismatch between rhetorical support for cooperation and the limited institutional follow-through during this period illustrates how leadership attitudes can constrain the entire governance chain.

4.1.3. Renewed Regionalism and Gradual Operationalization (2017–2024)

As it was widely noted by scholars, President Mirziyoyev's "good-neighborliness" and integration agenda changed the tone in inter-governmental relations in Central Asia (Matveeva 2019; Ernazarov 2020). Water issues also entered the agenda related to trust building, opening borders, and economic relationships. Starting from 2017, a significant increase in presidential meetings and summits was observed, such as the initiation of annual Central Asian Consultative Meetings. The declarations from this period became more frequent and operational. They mentioned joint data sharing, cooperation on small and medium hydropower projects, modernization of monitoring systems, and increased coordination within the ICWC and IFAS frameworks. As reflected in Table 4.1, the sharp increase in institutional commitments (by 45%) and operational ones (by 15%) shows a higher rate of implementation compared to the previous periods.

Although many of these initiatives remain partial or at a pilot scale, the discourse clearly shifts from survival and symbolism to pragmatic problem-solving. Political elites and decision-makers tend to use the concept of water as an opportunity rather than as a possible cause of conflict. Conversely, the results obtained also indicate that the rapprochement of diplomacy does not necessarily result in the elimination of these barriers, which will be explained in further sections of this chapter.

4.1.4. Summary: from Symbolism to Cautious Implementation

In a nutshell, the development of presidential diplomacy in the Syr Darya basin confirms the gradual shift from symbolic declarations in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s toward more concrete, though still cautious, forms of cooperation after 2016. This trajectory directly answers RQ1:

The exercise of presidential diplomacy has become increasingly frequent and operational with time.

Leadership change in Uzbekistan has been an important turning point.

The weight of Soviet legacies, national priorities, and institutional weaknesses has yet to allow a full transformation of political intent into practice.

These findings set the stage for the following sections, which examine in detail how institutions and operational actors have responded to the changing diplomatic environment.

4.2. Institutional Translation of Political Commitments (RQ2)

The institutional analysis leads to the conclusion that political commitments at the presidential level cannot always be translated into institutional action. Although political leaders have voiced regular support for cooperation since 2016, the institutions responsible for the implementation of such commitments-the ICWC, the IFAS, and the Basin Water Organizations-operate within constraints that limit their capacity to act on political directives.

Political cycles are clearly reflected in institutional documents. ICWC protocols issued after the first Central Asian Consultative Meeting in 2018 have more references to joint monitoring and coordinated reservoir operations (ICWC Protocol No. 2, 2018). The IFAS Executive Committee meetings held in 2019 and 2020 adopted initiatives aimed at modernizing data-sharing and promoting basin-level cooperation (IFAS EC Minutes, 2019; IFAS Annual Report, 2020). The increase in such decisions corresponds directly with the political “warming” associated with Uzbekistan’s policy shift after 2016 (Matveeva 2019; Ernazarov 2020).

Despite this heightened activity, most decisions are procedural. ICWC protocols often reaffirm past commitments without additional mechanisms for implementation-for instance, annual decisions from 2010 to 2015 repeatedly emphasize the need for "timely exchange of hydrological data," yet BWO Syr Darya reports indicate continued discrepancies between national and basin-level measurements throughout this period (BWO Syr Darya Annual Report, 2014; 2016). This pattern illustrates the persistence of data-sharing problems despite strong rhetorical support.

The variance between planned and actual water releases is another recurring problem. For a number of years, in 2008, 2011, 2017 and 2021, for example, BWO Syr Darya reported divergence from the ICWC-adopted seasonal schedules due to upstream winter energy shortages and downstream irrigation needs. (BWO Syr Darya Operational Bulletin, 2008; 2011; 2021). These divergences illustrate how national priorities override institutional plans. They also reflect the limits on institutional authority: the ICWC decisions are taken by consensus**,** yet have no binding force for enforcement (Sehring 2009; Zinzani 2015).

This is also rooted in structural constraints. BWOs continue to rely on Soviet-era mandates and equipment, or face other infrastructure limitations that make regular data gathering or basin-wide coordination problematic (Dukhovny and Sokolov 2008; World Bank 2010). There are several meeting minutes of the ICWC, which mention the decay in hydropower and irrigation infrastructure and its need for modernization, but funding and political follow-up are scarce so far (ICWC Session Minutes 2019; 2022).

A second problem is the fragmentation across institutions. The ICWC, IFAS, and BWOs often duplicate tasks or are uncertain about their mandates, according to the internal IFAS reviews for 2018–2020 (IFAS Internal Review 2020). Even when the institutions would like to act in concert, such fragmentation makes it slower to come to decisions.

In other words, RQ2 can be answered as: the political diplomacy does stimulate institutional activity, especially post-2016. Institutional decisions mirror political commitments but often in general terms. The main obstacle emerges at the implementation is limited because of a lack of enforcement, data-sharing problems, and structural constraints. Overall, institutions act as translators of political intent, rather than autonomous governance bodies themselves.

These findings illustrate why an implementation gap persists-institutions respond to political messages, but cannot enforce or operationalize them consistently.

4.3. Operational Cooperation and Conflict Prevention

The operational level of water governance-where reservoir operators, hydropower stations, and irrigation authorities manage day-to-day water flows-is where

the region's political intentions and institutional decisions meet physical reality. Unlike declarations or protocols, operational behavior depends on a combination of hydrological conditions, seasonal energy pressures, infrastructure limits, and the degree of interstate trust at any given moment. As evidenced from BWO Syr Darya bulletins, ICWC seasonal plans, and emergency coordination documents, operational practices often diverge from agreed schedules not because of any unwillingness but because the technical and seasonal pressures that each country confronts frequently overwhelm cooperative arrangements.

Perhaps the most apparent trend in the data is a continuous discrepancy between planned and actual water releases. Seasonal allocation plans approved by ICWC regularly contain forecasted winter and summer releases. Their implementation, however, follows much more volatile rhythms. For instance, BWO Syr Darya reports for 2008, 2011, 2017, and 2021 point to higher-than-planned winter discharges from Toktogul, since upstream electricity shortages during very cold winters call for more water releases upstream. BWO Syr Darya Operational Bulletin 2008; 2011; 2017; 2021 These deviations during winter reduce summer storage, placing additional pressure on downstream users during the irrigation season and hence requiring supplementary coordination in emergency meetings and ad hoc adjustments to distribution plans.

A second pattern concerns the persistent difficulty of achieving consistent data-sharing. Nearly every BWO Annual Report from 2005 to 2022 notes gaps or inconsistencies between national hydrological measurements and basin-level data. In some years, for instance, 2014 and 2022, differences even led to temporary disputes about the accuracy of recorded inflows and outflows, complicating both planning and real-time decisions. Although political declarations since 2017 regularly call for modernization of monitoring systems, progress has been slow, and data exchange remains one of the most fragile elements of operational cooperation.

Against these challenges, the operational level also reveals moments when cooperation becomes unexpectedly strong. Crises-be they in the form of droughts, extreme cold, or energy shortages-tend to produce more flexible and pragmatic coordination than one might normally find in stable years. Thus, for example, the 2008 drought prompted negotiations between upstream and downstream states on emergency releases that prevented severe agricultural losses (UNDP 2009; BWO Syr Darya Crisis Report 2008). Similarly, during Kyrgyzstan's winter energy shortage in 2017, ICWC convened an unscheduled meeting that produced adjusted release schedules and

electricity support from Kazakhstan ICWC Emergency Minutes 2017. More recently, the regional energy crisis of 2021–2022 produced reciprocal arrangements to balance water releases and power availability IFAS Report 2022. These episodes align with the argument advanced in the literature that shared vulnerability can sometimes temporarily align national interests and induce cooperation (Wegerich and Olsson, 2010; Murakami, 2017).

At the same time, the findings also reveal the limits of operational mechanisms in preventing long-term conflict. Reservoir operators cannot overcome structural upstream–downstream asymmetries but can only manage the consequences. Nor can they apply any instruments to ensure compliance in cases where national priorities run counter to ICWC guidelines. Infrastructure limitations—such as ageing monitoring equipment, incomplete automation, and uneven maintenance—continue to dampen the operational actors' ability to pursue basin-wide coordination principles more fully (World Bank 2010; ADB 2019). The operational level, in other words, is tasked with functions beyond its mandate and capacity.

What becomes evident is that operational cooperation in the Syr Darya basin is pragmatic but fragile. It works relatively well in response to emergencies-when the costs of non-cooperation are immediate-but becomes inconsistent when political relations cool or hydrological pressures ease. Because the operational actors lack authority, resources, and reliable basin-wide data, they cannot implement political or institutional commitments-even where these commitments exist.

The operational findings discussed together answer RQ3 and demonstrate that implementation remains the weakest link in the governance chain. Operational behavior reflects a continuous balancing between technical necessity and political context. It contributes to mitigating conflict in the short term but cannot on its own guarantee durable conflict prevention. The result is a system where cooperation is possible—and often visible—but rarely stable or predictable.

4.4. Why some Commitments Succeed, and Others Fail

Explaining why some political obligations in the Syr Darya basin are realized while others are not requiring an analysis of how political incentives, institutional capacity, and operational feasibility interact. The results of each political, institutional, and operational layer suggests that the variation in implementation outcomes can be

explained not by the presence of one factor, but rather the convergence of several reinforcing conditions. In this chapter, results from qualitative documents, theoretical frameworks, and the broader literature are combined to explain the mechanisms underlying success and failure.

4.4.1. Political Alignment as the Foundation of Successful Implementation

The most consistent explanation for successful cooperation is the degree of political alignment among the riparian states. Scholars repeatedly emphasize that regional water governance depends more on political relations than on legal frameworks or institutional design (Weinthal, 2002; Sehring, 2009; Dinar, 2012). Documentary evidence confirms this: during periods when upstream and downstream governments shared compatible political objectives—such as the early post-independence years (1992–1997), the short period of water–energy cooperation (1998–2001), and the renewed regional diplomacy after 2017—presidential declarations were more effectively translated into institutional action. ICWC meetings became more regular, BVOs engaged more closely in joint monitoring, and states complied more consistently with seasonal allocation plans. These findings support institutionalist expectations that cooperation is most likely when states perceive mutual benefits and when the political costs of non-cooperation are high (Keohane 1984; Young 1994).

In contrast, as political interests diverged, even the most elaborately developed agreements failed. The failure of the 1998 Syr Darya Water–Energy Agreement stands out starkly. Kyrgyzstan's requirement for winter hydropower conflicted with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan's need for summer irrigation water, resulting in unfulfilled compensation obligations and breakage. McKinney (2004); Rahaman (2012). Similarly, from 2009 to 2015, a sharp sense of political tension and mistrust manifested itself in an almost complete standstill of ICWC coordination, with several seasons seeing no protocol meetings and a strongly decreased reliability of water releases observed. These are only examples that prove a high level of political agreement is needed for implementation to succeed, irrespective of the institutional setup.

4.4.2. Institutional Capacity and the Limits of Enforcement

A second determining factor is the capacity and authority of regional institutions. The technical roles of ICWC, IFAS, and BWO Syr Darya are well-defined, but their authority is advisory, not binding (Dukhovny and Sokolov 2008; Murakami 2017). Documents reveal that institutions can coordinate a schedule, organize meetings, and draft operational plans, but they cannot compel adherence or punish deviations. Consequently, even in cases where political declarations explicitly require greater cooperation or modernization, institutions must rely on voluntary state action.

This structural constraint finds repeated expression in the institutional documents. ICWC seasonal plans regularly include the qualifier "implementation subject to agreement of the parties," which reduces their enforceability. BWO Syr Darya elaborates detailed operational schedules, but it has no authority over upstream hydropower generation decisions, enabling national ministries to override regional coordination whenever domestic energy needs become urgent. IFAS, despite its political visibility, lacks operational functions and financial autonomy, hence limited influence on actual water management. These institutional weaknesses explain the reasons why commitments requiring strong coordination, like modernization, digitalization, or long-term water-energy exchanges, rarely go beyond declarations.

4.4.3. Operational Feasibility and Resource Constraints

Even under politically and institutionally enabling conditions, commitments that are not operationally feasible cannot be implemented. The Syr Darya river basin is faced with challenges of highly variable hydrologic conditions, old infrastructure, and outdated hydrologic monitoring tools (UNDP 2017; ADB 2019; CAREC 2022). It appears evident in many documents that the various intervention agencies rely on manual observations, paper-based approaches, and patchy national systems; hence, no scope exists for any coordinated effort.

For instance, the issues of winter emergencies—such as the severe cold periods of 2012 and 2023—have led to an increase in the production of hydroelectric power in the case of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, where there have been huge. Downstream irrigation deficits in summers such as 2008 and 2021 further illustrate that basin-scale coordination breaks down in times of climatic or energy crises. According to scholars,

such failures reflect the gap between political ambitions and operational realities (Micklin 2014; World Bank 2010). That is, cooperation is not only a question of political will but also of technical capacity and infrastructure reliability.

4.4.4. Sensitivity of Commitments: Why some tasks are easier to implement?

The results also indicate that the nature of the commitment itself is a strong predictor of success: the more routine, technical, and inexpensive the task—such as drafting ICWC water allocation plans, exchanging basic hydrological information, or carrying out joint inspections—the more likely it is to be consistently fulfilled, as there are no high political or financial risks involved. These findings resonate with international governance literature, indicating that cooperation is usually most stable where transaction costs are low and tasks are relatively straightforward (Ostrom 1990; Hasenclever et al. 1997).

By contrast, commitments with compensation mechanisms, long-term energy-water exchange, large infrastructure investments, or binding legal reforms tend to fail. These require high political risk, continuous financial resources, and strong institutional enforcement-all conditions that are rarely simultaneously present in the region. The persistent failure to modernize the regional monitoring systems, harmonize water legislation, or operationalize the data digitalization initiatives further testifies that high-cost or politically sensitive commitments remain aspirational, not implemented.

4.4.5. Combined Explanation: A Multi-Level Governance Perspective

Integrating these factors through multi-level governance explains why implementation varies across tasks and periods. Successful cooperation requires correspondence between three levels: the political level (the presidents), the institutional level (ICWC, BWO, IFAS), and the level of actual operation (reservoirs and agencies monitoring the natural environment). Breakdowns at any link affect the entire chain. For instance, vigorous political pronouncements without operational viability result in symbolic cooperation; operational viability without political endorsement means inaction; and institutional plans without enforcement capability result in partial implementation at best. This multi-level interaction explains why

cooperation in the Syr Darya basin is strongest at the rhetorical level, moderate at the institutional level, and weakest in daily operational practice.

4.5. Summary Of Key Findings

The analysis of political declarations, institutional documents, and operational records shows that cooperation in the Syr Darya basin represents a complex interplay of political, institutional, and technical factors. Whereas political leaders have regularly reiterated their commitment toward regional cooperation, the translation of these pledges into institutional reform and operational practice has been uneven. The findings indicate, quite strongly, a clear hierarchy in the strength of cooperation across governance levels: political expressions of cooperation are the strongest, institutional actions are moderately consistent, and operational implementation is the most fragile.

First, political alignment appeared as the most influential factor for successful implementation. Periods of improved interstate relations, especially in the aftermath of the change of power in Uzbekistan in 2016, were characterized by more proactive ICWC meetings, better data exchange, and closer interaction among national water agencies. Conversely, episodes of political tension between the states resulted in stagnation of the institutional activity and an evident decline in compliance with seasonal water allocation plans.

Second, the evidence underlines the pivotal position of institutional constraints. Even though ICWC, IFAS, and BWO Syr Darya constitute a relatively dense institutional regime, none have the authority to enforce their decisions. Their charters include only coordination, advice, and information, thereby circumscribing their capacities to translate presidential promises into concrete action. As a result, institutional performance rises and falls with political circumstances, thus corroborating studies that have characterized Central Asian water institutions as “politically dependent structures rather than autonomous governance mechanisms.”

Thirdly, analysis of operational documents reveals that cooperation is hugely restricted by technical capacity and resources. A lack of effective monitoring systems, data sharing, and the use of manual observation erodes the reliability regarding the degree of cooperation. Climate pressure and energy shortage problems further add to the complexities in the implementation process, where countries have to prioritize the

needs at the global level at the cost of the plan at the regional level. Some challenges keep this operating procedure as the weakest link in the chain.

Finally, the results show that the type of commitment matters. Routine, low-cost activities—such as the elaboration of allocation plans or joint inspections—are typically carried out, whereas politically sensitive or costly commitments—such as water–energy swaps, the modernization of monitoring systems, or legal harmonization—are rarely, if ever, honored.

Taken together, these findings verify the major thesis statement of this thesis:

It is in the Syr Darya river basin where cooperation is strongest at the level of rhetoric, followed by institutions, and where it is least reliable at the level of operation. This is where the gap between commitments and performance is driven both by its fluctuations and its failures based on its authority and planning. These findings form the foundation of the theoretical debate and strategic proposal of the following chapters.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

N	*Research Question*	*Key Finding*	*Theoretical Link*
1	***RQ1: How has presidential diplomacy evolved since 1995?***	***Shift from symbolic (75% pre-2016) to operational (60% success post-2016)***	***Constructivism: leadership narratives***
2	***RQ2: Conditions for successful translation?***	***Technical/low-cost tasks succeed; compensation fails***	***Institutionalism: mandate gaps***
3	***RQ3: How does cooperation prevent conflict?***	***Data-sharing/monitoring builds trust***	***Multi-level governance: coordination***

Table 5.1. Research Questions and Key Findings (Source: Author's Analysis of Findings)

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the empirical findings from the case studies through the exemplary framework of water diplomacy explained in Chapter 2 of this thesis. It will also answer the three research questions posed in the introduction, with the patterns revealed in Chapter 5. Used to demonstrate an increased comprehension of water diplomacy in a transboundary region, in this case, the basin of the Syr Darya River in Central Asia.

5.1. Reflection on the Research Questions

RQ1: The presidential level of water diplomacy began from the symbolic commitments of the Declaration of Nukus in 1995 and progressed towards practical cooperation after 2016 due to the changes in the Uzbek government.

RQ2: For high-level declarations to successfully translate into institutional and operational results, the conditions are: (1) technically routine business, (2) political alignment, and (3) minimal financial outlay. Ambitious projects requiring pay always fail.

RQ3: Very specific cooperation mechanisms, like water and energy trade, database sharing, and common monitoring, avert conflict because they underpin trust and enable drought-year conflict resolution.

Cooperation Type	Total Commitments	Successfully Implemented	Success Rate	Key Examples
Symbolic	**24**	**22**	**92%**	**Nukus Declaration (1995)**
Institutional	**9**	**4**	**44%**	**ICWC data protocols(routine), IFAS reform (failed)**
Operational	**6**	**2**	**33%**	**Seasonal releases(routine), Water-energy swaps(failed)**
Total	**39**	**28**	**72%**	

Table 5.2 Implementation Success Rates per Type of Cooperation (1995-2024) (Source: Author Analysis of Presidential Remarks and Institutional Data, 1995-2024)

As shown in Table 6.2, although symbolic commitment enjoys a near-universal level of success, institutional reforms are successful only in the context of routine conditions, and cooperation at the operational level, especially ambitious water-energy trade, remains the most difficult. This clearly verifies the thesis: translation from rhetoric to reality needs mandate, resources, and feasibility.

5.2. Interpreting Political Diplomacy through Constructivism and Institutional

These results indicate that the data on politics, found in the region of Central Asia, is characterized by a quite high level of influence from the narratives and politics, covered by the constructivist theory. Periods of active summit diplomacy correspond to those specific moments when leaders articulate either a common regional vision or emphasize cooperation as part of a broader identity project. The turn in Uzbekistan's foreign policy after 2016 presents one such clear example: the narrative of "good-neighborliness" and "new regionalism" became the reason for the revival of political dialogue, stronger diplomatic language, and efforts to strengthen institutional

platforms. Constructivism helps explain this transformation not in material terms but rather in terms of the redefinition of political identity and regional relationships.

At the same time, institutionalist theory clarifies the limitations of such a political discourse. High-level statements establish expectations and signal political priorities, yet institutions like ICWC, IFAS, and BWO Syr Darya lack the enforcement mechanisms necessary to enforce their implementation. Institutionalism explains how cooperation is most stable when institutions, by means of clear rules, monitoring, and enforcement, can reduce uncertainty, but the Syr Darya institutions fulfill mainly coordination functions rather than regulatory ones. Their potential to transform political intentions into practice thus remains constricted. While constructivism explains the emergence and changes in political rhetoric, institutionalism shows why such rhetorical commitments do not automatically translate into structural reforms.

5.3. Multi-Level Governance and the Implementation Gap

Multilevel governance provides a very useful framework for understanding the implementation gap between political commitments and operational implementation. There are several interlinked levels within the governance arrangement of Syr Darya: presidential diplomacy sets the political direction; regional institutions coordinate technical planning; national ministries interpret and adapt commitments in line with domestic priorities; and operational agencies manage day-to-day water releases. The results clearly indicate how alignment across these levels is seldom observed and is typically unstable.

While political declarations generally constitute the strongest layer of governance, institutional and operational layers exhibit uneven performance. A problem might even arise if the political elites call on a particular level of cooperation, while the ministries in those countries do not honor the regional consensus on certain matters, like the use of a regional territory for the harvesting of certain natural resources. This problem is not likely to arise in multi-level governance structures. It has been illustrated in the example of the Syr Darya basin.

Additionally, the level of horizontal coordination among the states is still poor. The upstream and downstream states have fundamentally different seasonal interests, and there is no shared mechanism to reconcile these differences. The failure of the 1998

Water–Energy Agreement demonstrates how differences in domestic priorities can cause cooperation to derail even when political intent seems to align. These multi-level discrepancies help explain why technical coordination as BWO monitoring or ICWC scheduling-often collapses during periods of domestic pressure or climate stress.

5.4. Explaining Outcomes through the Combined Theoretical Lens

By combining insights from all three theoretical perspectives, a more comprehensive explanation of Syr Darya cooperation emerges. Leadership narratives are explained through constructivism, the failure to implement through institutionalism, while multiple-level governance explains the effects of fragmentation on levels of governance. All three theories complement each other to explain even more how the level of cooperation is greater at the level of rhetoric than at the institutional level and greater at the institutional level than at the level of operations.

For example, political rhetoric from 2017 on was oriented around mutual trust and regional consensus, as the constructivists would expect. But institutional reforms remained limited since IFAS and ICWC could not develop modern monitoring systems and could not enforce compliance because they lacked authority and resources. Operationally, winter energy crises or drought conditions routinely forced Kyrgyzstan or the downstream states to deviate from agreed schedules. These discrepancies show how technical constraints and the interests of sectors can override political statements and plans rather than being subject to them. Moreover, the combination of theories can explain the successful accomplishment of low-cost commitments concerning routine activities, while the failure of complex, high-cost commitments can also be explained using the combination of theories because the activities of coordinating the ICWC and the BWO do not contradict the state's national interests. In contrast, commitments involving compensation, hydropower trade, infrastructure investment, or shared sovereignty require deeper institutional authority and stronger political incentives than currently exist.

5.5. Contribution of the Study

This thesis contributes to an understanding of Central Asian water diplomacy by showing that the core governance challenge in the Syr Darya basin does not relate to the absence of either political statements or institutional structures but rather to the lack of correspondence between the respective levels of governance. Unlike earlier research, which has focused primarily on either institutional design or political discourse, this study incorporates political, institutional, and operational documents to track how commitments evolve across layers of governance. The findings underline the necessity for strengthening institutional autonomy, modernizing technical systems, and developing mechanisms capable of reconciling upstream and downstream priorities-all issues which future policy reforms will need to address.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

6.1. Conclusion

This thesis investigated the evolution of presidential water diplomacy in the Syr Darya basin and analyzed how political commitments are or are not translated into institutional and operational practice. The results show that the water governance system of Central Asia is multi-layered; political, institutional, and technical levels of interaction are complex and often inconsistent. While the necessity for cooperation and regional unity is repeatedly mentioned by top politicians, the capability for its implementation by institutions and operational agencies is seriously limited.

One of the primary findings of the research study is that the level of cooperation in the Syr Darya Basin is very strong in the rhetorical level of international politics, moderate in the institutional level, and the least in the operational level of international politics. The fact that the same continued to exist is an indication of the presence of structural issues in the Syr Darya river system. Political statements carry the imprint of the discourse of regional politics, while the bodies named above lack the power to translate the same into reality. Outdated monitoring systems, hydropower dependencies, divergent national priorities, and climate-induced stresses often override political promises and institutional plans at the technical level.

Analysis of documents ranging from 1992 to 2024 reveals that international cooperation is successful when political alignment among states is strong, when promises are technical and low-cost, or when roles within international institutions are well-defined. On the other hand, commitments entailing long-term coordination, compensation, modernization, or legal integration tend to fail. The collapse of the 1998 Water–Energy Agreement and recurrent deviations from seasonal schedules support the fact that regional outcomes are still shaped by deep structural contradictions, especially between the upstream hydropower generation and downstream irrigation demands.

This thesis, therefore, provides a comprehensive explanation of cooperation dynamics within the Syr Darya basin through the combination of institutionalism, multilevel governance, and constructivist theories respectively. Constructivism explains how shifts in diplomatic discourses occur; institutionalism reveals the existence of institutional constraints; and multi-level governance explains how failures of alignment between political, institutional, and operational levels result in implementation gaps. The combined theoretical lens, hence, enhances the

understanding of the reasons underlying the fragility of cooperation despite the multifarious declarations and agreements.

Ultimately, the implication of the findings is that the fate of regional cooperation depends on how the structural divergences between political discourse, institution-building, and operational capacity are filled in and bridged in appropriate ways. Unless deeper reforms are enacted in terms of institutional design, data systems, and energy–water coordination, the gap between declarations and reality will persist.

6.2. Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are presented based on the empirical and theoretical findings to strengthen water diplomacy and governance in the Syr Darya basin, including three layers of governance: political, institutional, and operational.

6.2.1. Reinforcing Political-Level Cooperation

1. Institutionalize Presidential Consultative Meetings

While high-level talks restarted in 2017, regional cooperation has significantly improved. The 2025 Tashkent Consultative Meeting was a step in the right direction by passing on decisions on a permanent secretariat for the Consultative Meetings and annual rotation with a structured agenda as a host country for these meetings. Further progress in this area is necessary by institutionalizing these policies and making high-level summits less dependent on personal diplomacy and more about conflict prevention based on predictable and rules-based mechanisms.

2. Develop long-term regional water–energy vision

Because they do not establish a long-term strategic framework for cooperation, successive short-term agreements have collapsed. A mutually developed and endorsed at the presidential level vision document could provide political direction for energy-water planning harmonization.

6.2.2. Strengthening Institutional Capacity

1. Describe the mandates of ICWC, IFAS, and BWOs

Overlapping mandates and a lack of clearly defined institutional roles exacerbate the problem of coordination. What is now needed is a more formal institutional review, perhaps triggered by the presence of IFAS.

2. Extend greater powers to ICWC and BWO Syr Darya

As long as these are advisory documents, implementation gaps are present. Member states should give authority to ICWC to issue binding operational directives, and BWO is empowered to coordinate directly with national hydropower and irrigation agencies.

3. Increasing financial independence

Without secure financing, institutions cannot professionalize or monitor effectively. The creation of a regional financing mechanism—via member state contributions or partnerships with donors—would create operational capacity over the longer term.

6.2.3. Strengthening Operational Practice

1. Modernize hydrologic monitoring systems

The majority of operational failures are due to outdated equipment. This involves automated gauging stations, real-time telemetry, and integrated basin-level databases for precise monitoring and coordinated releases.

2. Extend and develop data-sharing collaborations. There could be reduced uncertainties and improved seasonal planning with shared data systems. The states could be encouraged to standardize measurement and reporting procedures transparently.

3. Develop emergency response plans. Climate-driven events-droughts, heatwaves, severe winters-are repeatedly disrupting cooperation, and basin-wide emergency plans would enhance crisis coordination as well as eliminate unilateral decisions.

6.2.4. Addressing the Water–Energy Nexus

1. Establish a revised water–energy compensation mechanism

Past failures in water–energy trades indicate that compensation needs to be predictable and enforceable. A revised framework—potentially backed by international partners—may stabilize winter and summer operations. 2. Align national energy policies with regional water requirements. Decisions made by energy ministries often run counter to the needs of basin-level water. National strategies will have to be aligned with regional objectives if the seasonal tensions are to be minimized.

6.3. Future Research Directions

This study also identifies several areas where further research might usefully be undertaken to deepen understanding of water diplomacy in Central Asia:

Financial mechanisms play an important role in sustaining cooperation.

The potential of digital technologies to improve monitoring efficiency

Long-term climate projections and their governance implications

Comparative analysis between the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya basins

These areas deserve further research to consolidate policy solutions and frameworks of regional cooperation.

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