

The Role of Water Diplomacy in Strengthening Regional Stability in Central Asia

From institutional cooperation and informal neighborhood diplomacy to practical water–energy benefit sharing

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Executive Summary

Central Asia is organized around major transboundary rivers and highly interconnected water, energy and agricultural infrastructure. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya link the five post-Soviet Central Asian states and Afghanistan within the wider Aral Sea basin. The region’s main water-security problem is not an inevitability of “water wars.” It is the persistent mismatch between shared river-basin interdependence and fragmented institutions that have not consistently reconciled upstream hydropower needs, downstream irrigation demand, climate uncertainty and the interests of all riparians. Approximately 80% of the Amu Darya’s flow is formed in Tajikistan, while approximately 74% of the Syr Darya’s flow is formed in Kyrgyzstan; much of the major irrigation demand lies downstream (Sehring & Ibatullin, 2021). The resulting challenge concerns the timing, reliability and use of water resources as much as the volume of water available. The paper therefore asks: How, and under what conditions, can water diplomacy strengthen regional stability in Central Asia?

This paper uses a qualitative review of selected literature on water diplomacy in Central Asia and a comparative analysis of documented regional arrangements. It distinguishes transboundary water cooperation from water diplomacy, understood as the political and practical process of negotiating contested interests and developing legitimate arrangements concerning the use of water resources. It evaluates diplomatic effectiveness through continuity of dialogue, accommodation of competing interests, implementation capacity, conflict mitigation and basin inclusiveness.

Four findings emerge. First, Central Asian water diplomacy has developed region-specific characteristics and has helped sustain cooperation, but its effectiveness is uneven and cannot be inferred solely from the absence of interstate water wars. Second, a distinctive regional strength lies in the interaction of formal institutions with professional networks, local water managers and neighborhood-based informal diplomacy. Third, the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) provides an important platform for dialogue, yet fragmented mandates, irrigation-centered institutional legacies, contested representation and limited enforcement constrain its ability to deliver equitable basin-wide outcomes. Fourth, bilateral agreements and water–energy exchanges

can transform seasonal competition into mutual benefit, but require credible implementation, transparency, local legitimacy and coordination with wider basin cooperation.

The policy priority is therefore to strengthen existing diplomatic assets while remaining open to reforming, updating or, where regional agreement supports it, replacing institutional arrangements that no longer function effectively: improve coordination within regional mechanisms; develop practical arrangements for seasonal water and energy needs; protect and renew cross-border professional networks; and establish a practical technical dialogue that includes Afghanistan in discussions concerning the use of water resources in the Amu Darya basin. These measures should be phased, monitored and adapted to changing climatic conditions.

Keywords: *water diplomacy; regional stability; Central Asia; Aral Sea basin; IFAS; water–energy nexus; informal diplomacy; transboundary cooperation.*

1. Introduction: Shared Rivers, Fragmented Governance & Regional Stability

Central Asia comprises five post-Soviet states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, while Afghanistan is also a key riparian in the wider Aral Sea basin. The basin is dominated by the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, whose waters historically sustained the Aral Sea and continue to connect the region's water, energy and agricultural systems. Upstream Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan need dependable winter electricity and the ability to operate hydropower infrastructure; downstream Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan depend to varying degrees on predictable summer water releases for irrigation and livelihoods. Afghanistan is an Amu Darya riparian but historically remained outside the principal post-Soviet regional arrangements. When seasonal priorities diverge, reservoir operations, electricity deliveries, irrigation supply and border relations can all become politically sensitive (Sehring & Ibatullin, 2021; Prniyazova et al., 2025).

This configuration gives Central Asian hydropolitics a specific character. During the Soviet period, an integrated regional system linked upstream summer water releases with downstream transfers of fossil fuels and electricity (Weinthal, 2002). Following independence, the centralized allocation and compensation structure weakened, while infrastructure, river flows and irrigation networks continued to cross newly internationalized borders. The challenge is therefore not simply physical scarcity: it is how independent states can renegotiate an inherited, highly interconnected water–energy system under conditions of unequal resource endowments and changing political interests (Izquierdo et al., 2010; Sehring & Ibatullin, 2021).

Climate change and new infrastructure development reinforce the urgency of this governance problem. Prniyazova et al. (2025) identify glacier retreat, greater hydrological variability, inefficient water use and Afghanistan's Qosh Tepa irrigation project as pressures on existing arrangements. Climate projections remain scenario-dependent and should not be presented as precise certainties. Their relevant policy implication is that arrangements designed around historical flows and fixed allocation assumptions may become less resilient as timing, variability and demand change.

The policy problem examined here is clear: Central Asia possesses extensive experience in negotiating shared waters, but existing diplomatic and institutional arrangements have not reliably converted that experience into inclusive, practical and climate-adaptive cooperation on the use of water resources. The guiding question is: How, and under what conditions, can water diplomacy strengthen regional stability in Central Asia?

The central argument is that water diplomacy has the greatest stabilizing potential when formal institutions, informal neighborhood-based negotiation and concrete water–energy benefit-sharing arrangements reinforce one another. These mechanisms already operate in the region, but their stabilizing effect remains limited where upstream and downstream interests are unequally represented, information is disputed, commitments are weakly implemented, or affected riparians and communities are excluded.

2. Analytical Framework and Methodology

2.1 Defining Water Cooperation, Water Diplomacy and Regional Stability

Transboundary water cooperation refers to practical coordination among actors sharing rivers, infrastructure or water-related information. It may include reservoir operation, seasonal allocations, infrastructure maintenance, joint monitoring and technical consultations. Cooperation can continue even when wider political relations are strained, and it does not necessarily resolve the underlying distributional disagreement.

Water diplomacy is a broader political and practical process through which state and non-state actors negotiate competing interests, manage disputes, build relationships and develop arrangements concerning the use of water resources. Following Sehring and Ibatullin (2021), this brief treats water diplomacy as a process aimed at establishing joint arrangements capable of producing equitable and sustainable outcomes. Routine cooperation becomes diplomatically significant when it enables negotiation, confidence-building, conflict management or accommodation of competing claims. IFAS should, therefore, be assessed primarily as a platform that can enable or constrain diplomacy, rather than automatically assumed to be an independent diplomatic actor.

Regional stability means the capacity of neighboring states and affected communities to manage disagreements without escalation, maintain predictable cross-border cooperation, and sustain essential water, energy and livelihood functions. It does not mean the complete absence of disputes. Dadabaev et al. (2023) show that conflict and cooperation can coexist across different levels and periods. Consequently, evidence of continued dialogue or the absence of interstate war cannot, on its own, establish that water diplomacy has caused stability.

The analytical framework combines institutional assessment with a constructivist perspective on regional identity and professional relationships. The institutional dimension examines representation, mandate, implementation and inclusion. The constructivist dimension draws on the concept of a regional “water neighborhood,” which emphasizes shared norms of neighborliness,

professional affiliation, informal consultation and collective problem-solving (Dadabaev et al., 2023). This approach does not romanticize informality: power asymmetries, unequal access and local grievances can persist alongside cooperative language.

2.2 Sources, Method and Limitations

The analysis is based on a qualitative review of selected academic and policy literature on Central Asian water diplomacy, chosen for its relevance to the guiding question and its coverage of formal institutions, informal networks, transboundary governance, climate pressures and regional water–energy relations. It draws particularly on Dadabaev, Sehring and Djalilova (2023), Sehring and Ibatullin (2021), Prniyazova et al. (2025), Izquierdo et al. (2010), Abdullaev et al. (2025), Janusz-Pawletta (2015), OECD (2025) and Weinthal (2002). Taken together, this literature highlights the importance of formal institutions, informal diplomacy, legal and institutional arrangements and water–energy coordination for managing transboundary water relations in Central Asia. Building on these strands of literature, this paper examines how these formal institutions, informal diplomacy and benefit-sharing arrangements interact in shaping the stabilizing potential of water diplomacy and translates these findings into policy priorities. The institutional evidence includes the 1992 Almaty Agreement, the 1998 Syr Darya water–energy agreement, the Chu–Talas arrangement, and bilateral agreements concerning the Orto-Tokoi/Kasansai, Farkhad and Andijan/Kempir-Abad reservoirs. These arrangements are compared across five criteria: continuity of negotiation, recognition of competing interests, implementation capacity, contribution to conflict mitigation and inclusiveness at basin and local levels.

The evidence base combines historical scholarship and policy reports, including Weinthal (2002) and Izquierdo et al. (2010), with studies published in 2021–2025 that support the principal analytical claims. Institutional participation, projected glacier change and infrastructure development may evolve; accordingly, statements about those matters are tied to the publication period of the cited sources rather than presented as independently verified current conditions. The analysis identifies plausible diplomatic mechanisms and documented patterns but cannot establish a definitive causal relationship between any single arrangement and regional stability.

3. Empirical Analysis and Key Findings

3.1 Water Stress Is shaped by Seasonal Interdependence and Governance Asymmetry

The Aral Sea basin's two principal rivers have average annual flows of approximately 79 km³ for the Amu Darya and 37 km³ for the Syr Darya. Around 80% of the Amu Darya's flow is formed in Tajikistan, while approximately 74.2% of the Syr Darya's flow is formed in Kyrgyzstan. Major irrigation withdrawals, however, are concentrated in the midstream and downstream areas of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan (Sehring & Ibatullin, 2021). These figures illustrate a structural mismatch between where much of the flow is generated and where much of the established irrigated demand is located.

The central diplomatic issue is seasonal timing. Upstream hydropower producers may need winter releases to generate electricity, while downstream agricultural systems require reliable deliveries during the growing season. Soviet-era exchanges offset this mismatch through coordinated transfers of fuel and power (Weinthal, 2002), but the post-independence erosion of those exchanges altered incentives for reservoir operation. The consequences include reduced predictability of summer supply and, in some circumstances, increased downstream winter flow or flooding (Sehring & Ibatullin, 2021; Izquierdo et al., 2010).

Allocation rules also reflect inherited asymmetries. Sehring and Ibatullin (2021, pp. 233–234) report that the historical Amu Darya quota system allocated 48.2% to Uzbekistan, 35.8% to Turkmenistan, 15.6% to Tajikistan and 0.6% to Kyrgyzstan, without accounting for Afghanistan. These figures describe a historical institutional arrangement, not a verified statement of present-day deliveries or legal entitlements. Their analytical significance is that post-Soviet cooperation began from a framework oriented strongly toward downstream irrigation rather than a jointly renegotiated balance among all current basin interests.

Climate and infrastructure pressures intensify this imbalance, but they do not make violent conflict inevitable. Glacier retreat can initially increase some meltwater contributions while creating longer-term uncertainty about seasonal flows; impacts vary across basins and climate scenarios. Similarly, Afghanistan's irrigation development raises questions about consultation and future allocation, but available source material does not justify a precise claim about its ultimate abstraction or diplomatic consequences (Prniyazova et al., 2025; Gafurov et al., 2023). The evidence supports a governance argument: greater uncertainty increases the value of adaptive planning, reliable information and inclusive negotiation.

3.2 Formal Institutions Sustain Dialogue but Do Not Resolve Structural Imbalances

The five post-Soviet Central Asian states established the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC) under the 1992 Almaty Agreement and created IFAS in 1993. These arrangements maintained a regional framework after the end of centralized Soviet administration. The wider IFAS structure incorporates the Executive Committee, ICWC, the Interstate Commission for Sustainable Development and the basin water organizations for the Amu Darya and Syr Darya (Sehring & Ibatullin, 2021).

These bodies perform distinct functions across political, administrative and technical levels. Heads of state provide high-level political direction. ICWC involves senior national water-sector representatives, including deputy-minister-level officials, and addresses interstate coordination. Basin water organizations, hydrological specialists, reservoir operators and other professionals carry out technical and operational work. Maintaining this distinction is important for assessing where political decisions are made and how they are implemented.

IFAS functions as an important platform for continued formal and informal dialogue. Sehring and Ibatullin (2021) document operational cooperation around infrastructure and professional contacts even during periods of political tension. They cite, for example, day-to-day cooperation concerning

pumping facilities located on Turkmen territory but operated or maintained by Uzbekistan. Such arrangements do not eliminate disagreement, but they help preserve basic cross-border functionality.

Nevertheless, institutional continuity should not be confused with institutional effectiveness. Sehring and Ibatullin (2021), together with the institutional analysis by Janusz-Pawletta (2015), identify fragmented mandates among IFAS-related bodies, inconsistent coordination, limited enforcement, dependence on national political instructions and insufficient integration of energy-sector concerns. Technical information systems have also suffered from perceptions of political bias and unequal representation. Kyrgyzstan froze its participation in IFAS structures in 2016 while remaining involved in certain reform discussions in an observer capacity; this is different from asserting that it formally withdrew from ICWC membership (Sehring & Ibatullin, 2021; Dadabaev et al., 2023).

These limitations have direct implications for regional stability. A platform can reduce uncertainty and preserve contact, yet still fails to produce rules accepted by all parties or ensure compliance with negotiated commitments. The available literature therefore supports a qualified assessment: formal institutions have helped maintain channels of cooperation, but they have not consistently delivered a sufficiently balanced, enforceable and inclusive basin-wide framework.

3.3 Informal Neighborhood Diplomacy Is a Distinctive but Uneven Regional Asset

Central Asian water diplomacy cannot be understood through formal agreements alone. Dadabaev et al. (2023) describe a regional “water neighborhood” in which shared professional identities, personal relationships, informal consultation and ideas of neighborly obligation influence hydropolitical behavior. Their argument helps explain why cooperation can persist even when official discourse is confrontational or high-level relations are strained.

One mechanism is the professional community of water specialists, sometimes identified as *vodniki*. Long-standing ties, shared technical education and repeated operational interaction enable specialists to communicate across borders and negotiate practical adjustments. Dadabaev et al. (2023) also describe *mirabs*, or local water managers, who negotiate water regulation in transboundary canals in the Fergana Valley when formal political channels are constrained. These practices represent operational diplomacy when they help reconcile competing needs, sustain communication or prevent localized disputes from escalating.

A second mechanism is informal consultation at the political and subnational levels. Dadabaev et al. (2023) identify the post-2016 period as a turning point in regional water politics, associated with changes in political leadership and the renewed use of informal regional consultations. The authors document multilateral consultative meetings among Central Asian heads of state beginning in 2018, as well as subsequent subnational initiatives in the Fergana Valley. In April 2021, for example, the leaders of Sughd Province in Tajikistan, Fergana Province in Uzbekistan, and Batken Province in Kyrgyzstan held a business forum focused on the integration of border regions, followed by further meetings in 2022. These examples illustrate how informal dialogue at both

regional and subnational levels can create space for signaling compromise and subsequent formal cooperation. The regional specificity lies not in an exceptional culture that guarantees cooperation, but in the interaction between inherited infrastructure, shared professional networks, norms of informal consultation, and pragmatic efforts to manage cross-border interdependence.

3.4 Bilateral Agreements and Water–Energy Exchanges can convert Rivalry into Mutual Benefits

Bilateral and trilateral arrangements offer a practical complement to region-wide institutions because they address specific facilities, border areas and seasonal needs. The Chu–Talas arrangement between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan illustrates how bilateral institutional mechanisms can translate shared water dependence into practical cooperation over transboundary infrastructure and water management. Because infrastructure located upstream can also serve downstream users, coordinated operation and cost-sharing can create a more direct connection between responsibility and benefit than a narrow focus on water volumes alone.

Additional documented examples include the 2017 Kyrgyz–Uzbek arrangement concerning the Orto-Tokoi (Kasansai) Reservoir, the 2018 Tajik–Uzbek agreement concerning the operation of the Farkhad Dam, the 2017 Uzbek–Turkmen agreement on water cooperation, the establishment of an Uzbek–Turkmen Water Commission in 2021, and the 2022 agreement concerning the Andijan/Kempir-Abad Reservoir. Dadabaev et al. (2023) also report that Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan agreed on a roadmap for the construction of the previously controversial Kambarata-1 Dam in early 2023.

Furthermore, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed an intergovernmental agreement on the joint management, rational use and safe operation of shared transboundary water bodies on 15 November 2025. The agreement provides for a joint Kazakh–Uzbek commission and the coordinated operation of a transboundary water accounting system.

Building on this cooperation, the two countries have continued their collaboration through a joint working group on environmental protection and water quality in the Syr Darya basin. Its 2024 work plan included coordinated sampling, analysis and data exchange, and the seventh meeting reviewed those results and developed further joint measures (CAREC, 2025). These cases illustrate how improved political relations, informal consultation and shared interests can facilitate more targeted and increasingly institutionalized cooperation.

Water–energy exchange is especially significant because it addresses the central seasonal contradiction. The 1998 Agreement on the Joint and Complex Use of Water and Energy Resources of the Syr Darya Basin, initially signed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and joined by Tajikistan in 1999, sought to coordinate upstream summer water releases with downstream energy or fuel supplies to upstream Kyrgyzstan during winter. In principle, this arrangement had the potential to transform the upstream–downstream relationship from a competition over the timing of water releases into an exchange of benefits across sectors.

In practice, however, the agreement was effective for only several years. In some years, the promised coal and gas supplies were not delivered to Kyrgyzstan, while from 2003 the parties failed to agree on annual protocols. Cooperation subsequently became increasingly bilateral and ad hoc, reducing transparency and weakening long-term planning and mechanisms for compliance. This experience demonstrates that a technically rational water–energy arrangement is insufficient without reliable compensation, credible commitments, regular coordination and effective monitoring (OECD 2025).

Targeted arrangements can also generate new risks. Bilateral agreements may fail to account for wider basin effects, while politically negotiated infrastructure agreements can encounter resistance from affected communities. Dadabaev et al. (2023), for example, note local protests surrounding the Andijan/Kempir-Abad agreement. Stability therefore depends not only on reaching an interstate bargain but also on whether its costs, benefits and consequences are sufficiently transparent and acceptable to affected communities.

The comparative implication is straightforward: narrower agreements are most useful when they provide operational specificity while remaining compatible with regional dialogue, basin-wide information exchange and meaningful consideration of local interests.

3.5 Climate Uncertainty & Afghanistan’s Exclusion Expose the Limits of Basin Cooperation

Existing regional arrangements are largely rooted in the geography of the former Soviet republics, while the hydrology of the Amu Darya extends beyond that political framework. Afghanistan contributes to and uses the basin but was not included in the original post-Soviet quota arrangements examined by Sehring and Ibatullin (2021). Prniyazova et al. (2025) identify the Qosh Tepa canal as a concrete example of why excluding a riparian from sustained basin dialogue can become increasingly problematic.

Inclusion is not equivalent to immediate agreement on allocations, recognition questions or a comprehensive treaty. A feasible first step would be technical engagement on planned infrastructure, environmental impacts, notification and other practical aspects of water-resource use. Such an approach addresses a practical source of uncertainty while acknowledging the political constraints surrounding broader regional negotiations.

Climate adaptation reinforces the same conclusion. More variable runoff, changing snow and glacier dynamics, aging infrastructure and inefficient irrigation increase the need for joint monitoring and flexible operating approaches. Prniyazova et al. (2025) highlight remote sensing, hydrological modelling and shared information platforms as potentially useful tools for improving planning and understanding changes in water availability. However, technological solutions should complement, rather than replace, established institutional and professional cooperation. Their effectiveness depends on how information is interpreted, communicated and incorporated into practical decision-making.

The findings are summarized below using the five criteria introduced in the methodology: continuity of negotiation, recognition of competing interests, implementation capacity, conflict

mitigation and inclusiveness. The table separates documented diplomatic contributions from the limitations that determine whether those contributions translate into regional stability.

Diplomatic mechanism	Documented contribution	Limitation for stability
IFAS / ICWC and basin water organizations	Sustain regional dialogue, seasonal coordination and operational contacts.	Irrigation-oriented legacy; fragmented mandates; weak compliance; contested representation.
Informal neighborhood diplomacy	Professional networks and local water managers keep cooperation functioning during political tension.	Depending on personal ties; may lack transparency, accountability and inclusive participation.
Bilateral and trilateral arrangements	Translate shared interests into reservoir operation, infrastructure maintenance and project agreements.	Can fragment basin cooperation or exclude affected communities and other riparians.
Water–energy benefit sharing	Links summer irrigation releases with upstream winter energy needs and compensation.	Requires reliable implementation, clear responsibilities, financing and coordination.
Basin-wide climate and Afghanistan engagement	Creates a basis for adaptive planning, early warning and inclusive dialogue on the Amu Darya basin.	Political constraints, differences in information availability and the absence of an inclusive basin arrangement.

Source: Authors' synthesis of Dadabaev et al. (2023), Sehring and Ibatullin (2021), Prniyazova et al. (2025) and Izquierdo et al. (2010).

4. Prioritized Policy Recommendations

The recommendations below follow directly from the evidence and are ordered according to institutional feasibility and their relevance to the most persistent governance gaps. They are intended primarily for Central Asian governments, IFAS-related bodies, national water and energy agencies, basin organizations and supporting international partners.

1. Rebalance representation & strengthen the practical mandate of existing regional institutions

The governments participating in IFAS-related reform should establish a time-bound review of decision-making, upstream and downstream representation, and coordination between water, energy and environmental authorities. ICWC-level consultations should involve officials with the

authority to connect water decisions to national energy policy, while technical implementation should remain with basin organizations and relevant specialists.

2. Develop practical seasonal arrangements linking water and energy interests

Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan should continue to utilize existing regional and bilateral cooperation mechanisms to explore practical seasonal arrangements that recognise the interdependence between upstream hydropower generation and downstream irrigation needs across the Syr Darya and Amu Darya basins. Such arrangements should take into account the specific hydrological and socio-economic conditions of each basin, national priorities, applicable agreements, and the respective interests and contributions of upstream and downstream countries. Cooperation could focus on enhancing predictability, information exchange and mutual understanding of seasonal water and energy needs, while remaining consistent with existing frameworks and avoiding the creation of unnecessary additional institutional, financial or legal obligations.

3. Institutionalize inclusive professional and local-level diplomatic networks

Regional bodies and national agencies should institutionalize regular exchanges among reservoir operators, hydrologists, local water managers and border-area administrations through standing coordination platforms, agreed meeting schedules, designated focal points, joint training and practical crisis-simulation exercises. These forums should widen participation beyond established professional networks and provide channels through which affected residents, farmers and women working in water governance can raise concerns. Their purpose is to preserve the demonstrated benefits of informal problem-solving while reducing dependence on a narrow set of personal relationships.

4. Launch a phased, technical Amu Darya dialogue that includes Afghanistan

Relevant riparians and acceptable international facilitators should begin with technical discussions on planned works, notification, flood or drought risks, environmental impacts and practical aspects of water-resource use. Participation in practical exchanges should not be made contingent on resolving every broader political dispute. The immediate objective is to reduce uncertainty and establish communication; any later discussion of water use should be informed by available evidence and the interests of all basin states.

5. Integrate climate adaptation and demand management into every cooperation package

Regional and national authorities should link reservoir coordination with scenario-based runoff assessments, irrigation-efficiency investment, infrastructure rehabilitation and environmental-flow considerations. International partners can support finance and technical expertise, but projects should be designed around locally agreed priorities and measurable outcomes. Monitoring should include water saved, forecast reliability, compliance with agreed operating schedules, participation

by relevant agencies and evidence that downstream ecological and community impacts are considered.

Implementation should be sequenced. In the near term, governments can strengthen technical working groups, identify areas for practical cooperation and map existing professional contacts. Over the medium term, they can pilot seasonal benefit-sharing arrangements and discuss an institutional reform roadmap. Broader basin inclusion and climate-adaptive approaches require sustained political engagement and should develop from evidence generated through these practical steps.

5. Conclusion

Water diplomacy in Central Asia is neither an absent practice that must be invented nor an established system that has already resolved the region's water problems. Its demonstrated strengths lie in the combination of institutional dialogue, neighborhood-based informal cooperation and practical arrangements around shared infrastructure and seasonal water–energy needs. Its principal weaknesses are unequal representation, uneven implementation, differences in information availability and incomplete basin inclusion.

Regional stability is most likely to benefit when existing diplomatic practices are made more inclusive, practical and adaptive, and when negotiated benefits extend across sectors, borders and levels of governance.

The analysis suggests that the region does not necessarily require an entirely new institutional architecture. Instead, existing mechanisms can be strengthened through improved coordination, practical seasonal cooperation, professional networks and broader dialogue among affected riparians.

The water–energy relationship is particularly important. Seasonal differences between upstream hydropower requirements and downstream irrigation needs can create tensions, but they can also provide a basis for mutually beneficial cooperation. Practical arrangements that recognize the interests of both upstream and downstream users can help transform seasonal competition into opportunities for cooperation.

At the same time, informal professional and interpersonal networks remain an important part of regional cooperation. While many experienced professionals are now retiring, new professional connections continue to develop through the region's broader cooperation in water, energy and environmental management. Existing regional institutions, together with joint training programmes, seminars, study visits and other activities organized by Central Asian countries and international partners, provide regular opportunities for professionals from different countries to meet and work together. These exchanges are particularly important for younger specialists, as they allow them to get to know their counterparts, develop professional relationships and build trust through direct interaction. Over time, such contacts can make communication easier and support practical cooperation, including when formal channels are under pressure.

Climate change and infrastructure development further underline the need for flexible and adaptive approaches. Remote sensing, hydrological modelling and information platforms can support planning, but technological instruments should complement established institutional and professional cooperation rather than substitute for political dialogue.

The inclusion of Afghanistan in practical discussions concerning the Amu Darya is another important consideration. Such engagement does not require immediate agreement on all questions of allocation or the creation of a comprehensive basin treaty. Technical and professional dialogue can provide a gradual starting point for reducing uncertainty and expanding communication.

Ultimately, water diplomacy can contribute to regional stability when it creates conditions in which differences over the use of water resources can be addressed through dialogue, practical cooperation, mutual benefit and predictable interaction rather than escalation.

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