www.water-alternatives.org Volume 16 | Issue 3

Dadabaev, T.; Sehring, J. and Djalilova, N. 2023.
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Water Alternatives 16(3): 930-948

Central Asian Water Neighbourhood: A Constructivist Reconceptualisation of Hydropolitics in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT: Transboundary water conflict and cooperation are often conceptualised through the premises of national sovereignty and national interests, which leads to transboundary collaboration being perceived as detrimental to (rational) sovereign state interests. For Central Asia, this perspective has led to a preoccupation by Western, rationalist IR theorists with conflict scenarios that have not occurred. In this paper, we apply a constructivist approach to understanding Central Asian hydropolitics and relate it to the discussion of emotional aspects of international relations. We do so through an analysis of the interconnection between the ideas of 'neighbourhood' and 'nationhood' in Central Asia, through the notions of brotherhood/fraternity and informal collective decision-making for joint water management. These two aspects can explain why – even in years of political tensions and heated rhetoric around water – an understanding persisted that water issues cannot be approached or resolved through violence or one-sided actions, and (informal) cooperation contributed to conflict prevention. Based on a review of four phases of hydropolitics in Central Asia, we elaborate the notion of a regional 'water neighbourhood' to show that Western, rationalist conceptualisations of state and interstate relations fall short of explaining the different realities of transboundary water relations around the world.

KEYWORDS: Hydropolitics, water management, Central Asia, constructivism, regional identity

INTRODUCTION

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan[1] struggled with how to balance their newfound national control over water resources with the fact that these resources are also a regional public good. Over the past 30 years, two conflicting views of transboundary water governance in the region have emerged, as described below.

Some studies, particularly those from the early years of independence, have focused on Central Asian countries' efforts to assert their national sovereignty over their resources (Smith 1995; Golubev, 2001; Borisova, 2015). These narratives have dominated discussions on water sharing in the region,

[1] While Afghanistan is part of the Aral Sea basin and has close cultural ties with some Central Asian countries, in this article, we focus on the five former Soviet republics and their joint regional identity.

emphasising state sovereignty, and are often based on realist international relations theory, leading to warnings of water-related conflicts. Such stories have been prevalent both within and outside the region, and both donors' representatives and regional experts often concur that the main barrier to cooperation is a lack of political will to share water resources, driven by self-interest. On the other hand, there has also emerged a second, equally powerful narrative that stresses that, since independence, there has been a strong political commitment to water cooperation, which is evidenced by numerous agreements and actions aimed at establishing regional institutions to manage water resources, considering both national and regional needs.

How can we reconcile these two seemingly polar-opposite positions on the attitudes and actions of Central Asian governments towards the governance of transboundary waters in the region for an academic narrative of regional international relations? How do these conflicting narratives relate to each other and to the situation on the ground? What role have joint or collective norms and values played in shaping the hydropolitical relationships in the region?

This paper proposes that the history and currents of hydropolitics in the region need to be conceptually reconsidered through a constructivist lens in academic discussions. To this end, we show the social construction of what we call a regional 'water neighbourhood'. By reconsidering the history and currents of water conflict and cooperation through a constructivist framework, we argue that rationalist approaches (such as the realist and liberal approaches that are particularly popular in the Anglophone literature) to hydropolitics in Central Asia are excessively focused on formal processes and outcomes. Studies that detail the environmental regionalism in Eurasia point to the nature of regimes and authoritarian governance practices as a uniting point for such initiatives. For these studies, regional environmental institutions serve the purpose of legitimising authoritarian leadership (Agostinis and Urdinez, 2022; Obydenkova, 2022a). Consequently, they provide little if any coverage of the power of social norms, ideas, values, and perceptions, nor of the role of the social construction of relations between the states. (For exceptions, see Dubuisson, 2022.)

Scholars such as Zeitoun and Mirumachi (2008) or Mirumachi (2015) have challenged the assumption of unchanging, static, and linear (from conflict to cooperation or vice versa) conceptualisations of hydropolitics used in many studies and have shown that conflict and cooperation coexist. Other studies have also suggested that considerations of environmental governance need to encompass the process of construction of public values, norms, and agencies in the regions involved (Obydenkova, 2022b). Although in theoretical assumptions of positivist schools there is an attempt to avoid the open counterposing of conflict and cooperation, such binary conflict-cooperation positioning has been the dominant narrative of water consumption and generation between Central Asian (CA) states over the last 30 years (Golubev, 2001: 17; Dukhovniy, 2002; Borisova, 2015: 41-90). The constructivist approach proposed in this paper will help to uncover the social and cultural factors that influence the way water is managed and shared in the region.

To counter such counterposing of conflict over and cooperation around water, we argue and will show below that cooperation and conflict coexist in all phases of interactions between CA states, which include both formal and informal interactions on multiple scales. We attempt to reframe the understanding of hydropolitics in the region as an outcome of the social construction of relations between regional states, which involves both the highest levels of government as well as the technical level of government officials responsible for implementing cooperation. To analyse this, we use the three periods of hydropolitics in Central Asia identified by Menga (2018) as a starting point, but we adapt them to show how the respective dominant water relations are counterbalanced by more informal practices based on affective relations:

- 1991-1998[2] featured the formal institutionalisation of transboundary water governance through various interstate agreements and the establishment of regional organisations, despite these being perceived as unjust by some countries due to their sustaining the main principles of the Soviet-era rules.
- 1999-2006 saw a shift in regional water policies towards nationalism and unilateral action, with cooperation limited to bilateral, short-term, and informal formats.
- 2007 – mid-2016 was a period of revitalisation for large-scale hydropower projects and, with them, sincere political tensions, counterbalanced by informal and technical cooperation.
- Since the second half of 2016, regional cooperation has been revived, with regional formal and informal cooperation as well as numerous bilateral agreements, while conflict and contestation have erupted at the local level.

In addition to earlier analyses of these developments, we focus on the role of regional social norms and bonds, represented by the concept of 'neighbourhood'. This adds a new interpretation of the last 30 years of hydropolitics, showing how conflict and cooperation coexist but are not always equally visible with conventional, rationalist analytical lenses.

We also argue that if the contemporary neighbourhood-based approaches evident since 2016 continue to prevail in attempts to resolve water-related problems, they may eventually lead to a new category of shared regional sovereignty over water resources. As such, this may present a contribution to the resolution of other similar problems in the Global South and contribute theoretically to discussions of resource-related disputes in international relations (IR).

Methodologically, this paper attempts to contribute to the academic discussions of water governance in CA through a twofold structure: we first emphasise the deficiency of rationalist coverage dominating academic discussions of water governance in the CA region and then provide a particular example of policy coordination under the water neighbourhood concept. This serves as a way to better explain, academically, the relations amongst regional states and thus to break away from the rationalist tradition. To do so, we first outline the major theoretical frameworks that have been applied to describe CA regional hydropolitics; review institutional and legal frameworks developed in the region over the last 30 years; and analyse how the change in political leadership and informal consultations have led to the change of political environment in the region and resulted in an emerging common understanding of the importance of regional water governance. We will focus on the five former Soviet countries that share the Aral Sea basin, including its two main rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, many small, bilateral tributaries, and also other transboundary rivers such as the Chu and the Talas. We will not consider the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, China, and Russia, with which the Aral Sea basin countries also share important rivers.

In this paper, we first provide a critical overview of the dominant rationalist (realist and liberal) theoretical frames and instead offer a constructivist narrative as an alternative for reconsidering hydropolitics in the region. Then, in Section 3, we analyse the four identified phases of hydropolitics in Central Asia and how, in each phase, formal mechanisms of cooperation and parallel unilateral action interact with semiformal and informal formats of consensus-building at multiple scales. We engage with the concepts of brotherhood or fraternity and informal collective decision-making as aspects of a regional water neighbourhood (as defined in Dadabaev, 2021, 2022). In the final section, we conclude by discussing the findings and examining the future prospects of a regional water neighbourhood in Central Asia and beyond.

[2] Menga identified the first period as lasting until 1996, but we extended it to 1998 in order to include the 1998 Syr Darya Agreement.

THEORISING ON HYDROPOLITICS AND 'NEIGHBOURHOOD' IN CENTRAL ASIA

Analysing the hydropolitical approaches of Central Asian states has become the subject of various theoretical framings during the last 30 years. One of the most popular approaches has been the narrative, based on (neo-)realist theories, according to which CA states assumed their sovereignty over their water resources and now consider their resources to be their national property. This realist narrative attributes a certain positivity to this process by suggesting that this allows water managers to account for national interest and calculated gain. This narrative suggests that during Soviet times, water policy was largely impacted by ideology (championed by the 'cotton self-sufficiency' goal), and the interests of the CA Soviet republics were disregarded by the Moscow-based Soviet bureaucracy in charge of water management (Krutov, 1999: 245-260; Zonn, 1999: 157-180). Independence entitled these states to utilise the available water resources for their own benefit. From such a perspective, the basin-wide integrated water-energy management in Central Asia during the Soviet period was a colonial policy to be abandoned in favour of a national water policy that was supposed to reflect the interests and needs of each country. Most CA states have registered in their constitutions and other legislative acts that the water resources "within their territory [are] an integral property of the state and that water policy is their sovereign entitlement" (Tanrisever and Sakal, 2022).[3]

However, this realist view also acknowledges that the pursuit of self-interest produced, as a by-product, 'hydro-egoism' or 'resource nationalism' (see, e.g. Dukhovny and Ziganshina, 2011; Koch and Perreault, 2019; Perreault, 2021). Accordingly, these countries now consider their resource policies, including water, to be their sovereign entitlement (as a part of nation-building and even anti-colonial endeavour), with little attention given to those who share these water resources in neighbouring countries (Suyarkulova, 2014). In addition, the realist-driven narrative presents the (incompatible) agricultural and energy generation narrative of the region. Despite the centuries-long pre-Soviet history of coexisting and sharing their water, the realist narrative suggests that CA governments 'naturally' have only one choice: that of pursuing their own national interests for their survival. It also suggests that national interest consists of mutually exclusive economic policies, and thus they find themselves locked into the structural conflict over water resources. These types of narratives also largely place the authority over water with the national institutions of each CA state; such an understanding is projected by the Western rationalist IR but ignores the long (both pre-Soviet and Soviet) history when the water was governed through both omniregional and local institutions as opposed to national institutions that are relatively new to these states (O'Hara, 2000; Abdullaev and Rakhmatullaev, 2013; Obertreis, 2017). In this regard, although the Soviet legacy of water governance is traditionally (and rightfully) painted in negative colours (Zonn, 1999; Roberts, 2022), the sustained practice of coordinated water governance and shared knowledge about water during the Soviet years produced a culture of coordination within the CA bureaucracy, even in the format of "fraternal rivalry" (Roberts, 2018). In addition, realist rhetoric does not well explain the conflicting tendency towards the pursuit of national interest and the active regional institution-building efforts in the post-Soviet period.

In an attempt to nuance the realist tradition of thought, (neo-)liberal-institutionalist approaches suggest that although these states have undertaken 'hydro-egoist' policies, they have nevertheless engaged in institution-building along the lines of regionalism and cooperation. In line with this narrative, this process has been significantly assisted by international organisations, NGOs, and bilateral aid organisations arguing for the benefits of cooperation as opposed to the costs of non-cooperation (Weinthal, 2002; Pohl et al.; 2017). According to liberal thought, this has led to absolute gains in the region, although these were not necessarily equally distributed to all regional states.

[3] For instance, see Article 4 of the *Water Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, Article 5 of the law entitled On Water of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, Article 4 of the *Water Code of the Republic of Tajikistan* and Article 3 of the law On Water and Water Use of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Additionally, see the Water Law of the Kyrgyz Republic of 2001.

Functionalist approaches to liberal-institutionalist theory suggest that these states did not attempt to resolve the overall issue of regional water governance. Rather, given the lack of trust in each other, they tackle the narrower, technical issue of sustaining water supplies (water allocation quotas, etc) on an annual basis and creating new institutions that can ensure the maintenance of water supply-related facilities. In addition, such studies look at the (potential) role of the water-energy-food nexus in regional integration (Jalilov et al.; 2015; Saidmamatov et al.; 2020). This is exemplified by the agreements on compensation by downstream countries for lost electricity and the maintenance of water generation facilities in upstream countries, such as the Chu-Talas or Syr Darya Agreements mentioned below. Functionalist theory narrates such an approach as a response to the need to deal with the immediate problems of water supply. Accordingly, once success is achieved and trust is strengthened between these states, it is expected that cooperation spills over and expands into other areas (Wang, 2022).

The main actors in such institutionalist–functionalist narratives are not necessarily CA leaders but rather epistemic communities of water management professionals (who could serve as grassroots carriers of shared ideas, norms, and approaches in shaping the 'water neighbourhood' community), who were trained in the same Soviet educational institutions and worked in the Soviet water management bureaucracy (the epistemic community of practitioners) before the partition of the water management system after the collapse of the USSR (Dadabaev, 2004, 2005; Sehring and Ibatullin, 2021). While functionalist narratives can be effectively used to explain the formation of regional institutions, their impact and narrative power has diminished, as regional water institutions have been widely criticised for their lack of power and efficiency. The epistemic communities of like-minded water professionals of the Soviet era also hold diminished influence, as new generations of bureaucracies have been trained in each CA state after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In addition, the role of such bureaucrats was also "reduced from active agenda setters to observers" (Abdullaev and Atabaeva, 2012).

As exemplified by the realist and liberal narratives above, rationalist narratives of hydropolitics in the CA region assume that governments are rational and are the most important actors in transboundary water governance. In addition, they treat state interests as uniform, with some potential for evolution yet generally static and unchanging. They also limit our understanding of how the lack of readiness for water policy adjustments for the benefit of other riparian states sometimes turns into policies that favour cooperation and solidarity. In addition, as aforementioned, not only realist but also liberal schools are limited in their understanding of cooperation and do not generate any alternative terminology and shapes or formats of policy coordination that are not necessarily based on rationality and strategically calculated benefit.

There are some important studies that acknowledge this deficiency of the rationalist schools. Our paper builds on the understanding that water relations in the region are very complex and need to be considered by the academic community as being placed beyond pure state-centric categories of government agencies and the water bureaucracy, as well as rational or geostrategic categories such as hegemony and domination. We demonstrate that an understanding of hydropolitics also needs to be informed by the cultural and identity-driven categories that shape the practices of water cooperation and the perception of water as a common good.

Therefore, we employ a constructivist approach to show the importance of regionally derived concepts such as the neighbourhood (*qo'shnichilik*), which is closely linked to the idea of brotherhood or fraternity (*birodarlik, kardoshlik,* or *baurlastyk*) – the (imagined) kinship ties among the people of the Central Asian countries that require mutual respect, solidarity, and informal collective decision-making (*maslahat*) (Dadabaev, 2021, 2022). These concepts are based on the sense of belonging, inter-relatedness, and mutual dependency within the region and on different, informal formats of interaction and decision-making (Dadabaev, 2021, 2022; Sehring, 2021). We bring both of them together in the concept of a regional 'water neighbourhood', which relates to the understanding of the regional 'self' along the lines of 'neighbourhood' and 'brotherhood' and its role in governing shared waters. This will pave the way for demonstrating what many scholars refer to as the process of "how space, territory, and

society can be socially and politically constructed", which is exemplified by the case of water (Menga, 2016: 708).

The definition of the CA regional neighbourhood in the current study is derived from the social understanding of the place and role of neighbours in the majority of, if not all, CA societies. Historically, the role of neighbourhood relations was emphasised not only in urban areas but also in remote mountainous and steppe areas, as well as in more developed agricultural and merchant districts. Sustaining neighbourhood-owned buildings, mosques, and other commonly-held goods that in many locations were maintained through the Soviet period was an expression of social bonding and common values (Jabborov, 2003: 68-69). Above all, this understanding of the importance of neighbourhood is also informed by the religious Islamic values shared by all CA states, which prescribe four main obligations in respect to neighbours. These include but are not limited to compassion towards the neighbour, refraining from envying the neighbour's possessions, duty to preserve the neighbour from troubles, and displaying 'sabr' or patience in respect to the situation of the neighbour (see Islam.ru, 2017). In a similar manner, the attitude towards water as a common good shared by everyone in the neighbourhood, understood both in societal and regional meanings, is prevalent in the discussions among both the leaders and the public. This attitude towards water is also informed by the religious and ethnic norms of compassion and sharing achieved through the informal practice of consultations (*maslahat*). Although the Soviet period witnessed a time when CA nations were deprived of these indigenously informed practices, the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union demonstrated that these norms, rooted in social practices, are reflected both at the local level and in the behaviour of the state leaders and their decisions at the governmental level.

In highlighting these neighbourhood-driven logics, we built on the constructivist scholarship in international relations, which was also applied to hydropolitics (Julien, 2012). This approach compensates for the deficiencies of the abovementioned frames by explaining relations between states as socially constructed under the influence of various factors. According to this school, the patterns of state behaviour change over time as states react to the international and regional environment, and they are impacted by the political behaviour of 'others' as well as their regional identities, norms, and informal collective decision-making (Wendt, 1999).

CENTRAL ASIAN HYDROPOLITICS BETWEEN NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY AND THE REGIONAL NEIGHBOURHOOD

In the following section, we analyse how the different phases of hydropolitics in Central Asia were shaped by both formal and informal interactions, how they (counter)balanced each other, and how ideas of a 'water neighbourhood' or fraternity played out and interacted with the construct of national sovereignty in each respective phase. (For criticism of the western application of sovereignty, see Dadabaev, 2021, 2022; Menga, 2022).

Phase 1 (1991-1998): Institutionalising the Central Asian regional water neighbourhood

The first years after independence in 1991 not only witnessed the drive towards nationalising resources, including water, but were also accompanied by insistent calls and support for region-building. Even before the USSR fell apart, the leaders of the Central Asian Soviet republics raised their concern about the catastrophic situation in the Aral Sea Basin in a joint declaration of 23 June 1990, with the consensus that this was the outcome of the Soviet irrigation and water management practices that disregarded the environmental consequences. For these leaders to express these concerns at the time when the Soviet bureaucracy (at least de jure) was still in charge of the water management and distribution policies represented one of the earliest indications that CA regional practitioners and policy-makers recognised water to be of common regional concern. In October 1991, only a few weeks after most of the CA republics had declared their independence, the heads of the water agencies of five Central Asian states issued a joint statement stressing the need to establish joint institutions for water management

coordination, in which they referred to the "historical commonality of the peoples of Central Asia and Kazakhstan" (ICWC, 2022).

After the Soviet Union officially ceased to exist in December 1991, the intergovernmental Agreement on Cooperation in the Management, Utilization, and Protection of the Water of Inter-State Sources was signed on 18 February 1992. Although not ideal, the agreement was meant to sustain certain rules and practices of water sharing put in place under the Soviet administration. By "recognizing interdependence and interconnection of interests of all the republics in dealing with joint use of water resources according to the principles common for the entire region and equitable regulation of their use", the agreement stipulated that the spirit of the neighbourhood should guide water management and that upstream and downstream countries should not undertake any actions that would harm other countries. That is not to say that cooperation was indeed equal or that the agreements were equitable. Rather, upstream countries felt it cemented the water allocation of Soviet times and that this allocation was unequally beneficial to downstream countries.

Nevertheless, the agreement was a very important step in setting the norm that water needed to be treated in the spirit of the neighbourhood and as a common good. The agreement was followed by more multilateral agreements in the same spirit; the Kyzyl–Orda Agreement of 1993 ("Joint activities in addressing the Aral Sea and the zone around the Sea crisis, improving the environment, and enduring the social and economic development of the Aral Sea region") and the Declaration on the Sustainable Development of the Aral Sea Basin, adopted in Nukus in 1995, reaffirmed the basis of "mutual respect, good neighbourhood". In fact, almost all joint statements on regional water management by heads of state and governments after the collapse of the Soviet Union referred to the principle of the good neighbourhood as an important factor in pursuing water management policies.

In addition to norm-setting, these agreements also served the purpose of operationalising this cooperative approach by establishing the relevant regional structures. First, in 1992, the International Committee on Water (Management) Coordination (ICWC) had the responsibility for setting the guidelines for water-sharing practices and annual water consumption quotas. The two Basin Water Organizations (BWOs) for the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, which were established by the USSR in the 1980s, were incorporated into its structure.[4] In 1993, the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) was established to coordinate all basin-wide (donor-supported) projects and financial support. IFAS is spearheaded by the council of heads of state of CA countries. From the establishment of IFAS to 2021, there were 13 council meetings, which were held four times in Uzbekistan, five times in Kazakhstan, once

[4] The need to integrate water resources management and protection at the basin level was justified long before the independence of the countries under study. Although the Soviet water allocation system was implemented by the USSR Ministry of Land Reclamation and Water Resources (the Minvodkhoz) in consultation with the governments of the five republics, analysis of water deficit consequences in 1974-1975 and especially in 1982 showed that environmentally acceptable and quantitatively strictly controlled water supply is impossible without the coordinated actions of all countries in the region. Therefore, it was proposed that basin organisations should be established, and that these would manage water resources according to rules and schedules agreed upon by republics and approved by the Minvodkhoz. The organisation structure was approved in 1986 and, as a result, two Basin Water–management Organisations (BWOs) – the BWO Amudarya, headquartered in Urgench, and the BWO Syrdarya, in Tashkent – were established. According to State Decree No. 1110, all headwater management structures on rivers and main tributaries with flow rates of more than 10 m^3/sec were to be transferred to these BWOs. The BWOs were financed by the USSR's Minvodkhoz from the Union budget. Twice a year, they each submitted annual plans to the Minvodkhoz, which had already been agreed upon with the republics and included schedules of releases from reservoirs and water supply within the basin, based on forecasts prepared by the republican hydrometeorological services of Central Asia. The share of water for each republic was established in accordance with water allocation quotas approved by the USSR State Planning Committee. Annual plans, in which the most important component was water reserves in main reservoirs under multiyear regulation (Toktogul, Andijan, Charvak, and Nurek), were approved by the Deputy Minister of the USSR Ministry of Water Resources. At that time, two approaches to water allocation were formed: either in proportion to the irrigated area or in proportion to the demand determined for each crop and each province. Depending on hydrological forecasts, the BWOs could reduce or increase the limits for each country by up to 10%. They did not control water quality and were not responsible for water use in each country. Water supply to the Aral Sea and surrounding areas was based on the 'whatever is left' (*ostatochnyi*) principle.

in Tajikistan and three times in Turkmenistan. The governing board of IFAS, composed of deputy PMs of CA states, has met 17 times, including four times in Uzbekistan, twice in Kazakhstan, seven times in Tajikistan, and four times in Turkmenistan (Tulaganov, 2021). ICWC and the BWOs were integrated into this framework, as well as the Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development (ICSD). A number of scientific information centres as well as national branches have also become part of the organisational structure. Regional ownership of the institutions is manifested through a rotating chairmanship (every three years) and membership fees. Many sub-bodies of IFAS are located in Uzbekistan; these include the important Scientific Information Centre of ICWC, which is in charge of data management and sharing and advice on water policy development, and the BWOs, which are responsible for the operational aspects of water management and the hydraulic infrastructure that is of transboundary importance. This has led to the perception that these regional bodies are dominated by and biased towards certain countries, resulting in the construction of tense relations between member states due to the perceived symbolic and functional meaning of placing these bodies in Tashkent. Out of the same fears (which then served as constraints on relations, according to constructivist logic), it was also not possible to agree on a permanent location for the Executive Committee of IFAS, so it moves every few years with the changing chairmanship (Krasznai, 2017; Sehring and Ibatullin, 2021). To further operationalise the water allocation between the countries, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan signed an additional bilateral agreement in 1996 on the water sharing of the Amu Darya between them.

While the 1992 Agreement provided a consensus on the quotas for water allocation, it did not offer a mechanism for balancing the water needs of both the energy and agricultural sectors, again triggering an eco-nationalist response (which served as an important factor in the regional environment for further decision-making by heads of states). These concerns were addressed, at least for the Syr Darya River, in the 1998 Agreement on the Joint and Complex Use of Water and Energy Resources of the Syr Darya Basin, which was first signed by Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Uzbekistan, and was joined by Tajikistan in 1999. The agreement aimed to facilitate "efficient water releases during the growing season, prevent flooding of areas in mid- and downstream Syr Darya and for the rational use of existing water and energy resources".[5] It responded to the different water needs of upstream and downstream states: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lack enough resources to satisfy their energy needs in the winter months. They compensate for this by power generation using hydroelectric dams. Therefore, it is profitable for them to release a large portion of water during the winter months when the demand for electricity is the highest. On the other hand, the downstream countries of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan need water resources the most in the summer months, and for them, it is more beneficial for this water to be stored in winter and released in summer. Under the joint water-energy system in Soviet times, upstream countries received subsidised energy supplies in return for their water. While rationalist narratives emphasize this structure as the major impediment to water-sharing in the region, a constructivist lens leads us to see that many actors in the region, including heads of governments, indicated the potential mutual complementarity of this regional environment, should conditions be properly agreed upon. The agreement mentioned above built on this logic and provided that Kyrgyzstan would discharge water from

[5] To do so, the agreement detailed the average daily water releases from the Toktogul Reservoir in 1998, the Chardara Reservoir inflows, as well as water supplies to be provided by Kazakhstan through the Dostyk Canal. It defined the amounts of electricity to be supplied to the Kyrgyz Republic from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – enough to satisfy the needs of these countries in water and electricity generation. Additionally, Uzbekistan accepted the responsibility to provide natural gas in equal monthly shares in accordance with the Protocol on Progress in Implementation of the Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic on the Use of Water and Energy Resources of the NSDC Hydro Power Stations, dated 19 July 1997. According to Article 7, the Kyrgyz Republic was to reduce its own energy consumption by 10% compared to 1997 levels. In addition, the adjustments to the water releases, when necessary, were to be performed by the BWO SyrDarya and UDC Energia in agreement with the interested parties and on the basis of the existing fuel, energy, and water situation. In a similar manner, the Agreement on the Usage of Water and Energy Resources of the Naryn-Syrdarya Cascade of Reservoirs, dated 23 May 2000, with amendments and addenda made on 9 June 2000, has also provided for the water–energy exchange scheme.

its reservoirs in summer for the downstream states of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, while these would deliver fuel to Kyrgyzstan in winter, so that it would not need to produce hydropower, thus effectively addressing the perceived inequalities and gaps of the 1992 Agreement. According to the agreement, exact discharge times and amounts, as well as the price of energy to be sold to the downstream countries during the summer period and the transfer prices of coal, gas, and electricity, needed to be defined in annual protocols.

At the local, operational level, this was a period when the idea of sovereignty was not yet tied to a strict border regime. In the densely populated Fergana Valley, shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, rivers as well as man-made canals and irrigation systems crisscrossed and continue to cross borders and to be managed across borders. Local water managers, farmers, and people could also easily cross borders, and joint cross-border water management continued (Dadabaev, 2004).

Thus, the first phase of hydropolitical relations was marked by official declarations and agreements stressing cooperation (based on the logic of constructing a water sharing structure) and setting the institutional foundation for it, while the practical arrangements were rather unequal and reflected power asymmetries among the states. This initially did not seem to provoke noncompliance or opposition, probably also related to the domestic challenges of the transition period at that time. Nevertheless, it created distrust in the impartiality of the regional organisations and limited their effectiveness, and this would soon lead to a stronger voicing of national interests.

Phase 2 (1999-2006): From regional to bilateral cooperation and unilateral policies

After the first phase of institutionalising regional water cooperation, the next ten years saw a deterioration of both water availability (with two serious droughts in 2000 and 2001) and regional water cooperation. This was not only a consequence of more self-focused policies but also of the impact of capitalist market reforms (Murzakulova, 2022): with the privatisation of the energy sector and rising prices on the global market, the delivery of subsidised energy by downstream countries in exchange for water stopped. These factors pushed regional states to pursue policies primarily satisfying local needs, with upstream countries releasing water from reservoirs in winter to produce energy.

Such a change in the water release regime from summer for irrigation to winter for electricity generation soon violated the spirit of the 1992 agreement and made it even more challenging to reach annual agreements on water quotas. Eventually, a contradictory regional environment came into existence, with an official rhetoric stressing brotherly cooperation accompanied by a practice of pursuing exclusive national interests.

The 1998 Syr Darya agreement worked well for only a few years. In some years, the promised coal and gas were not delivered to Kyrgyzstan, which then released water in winter to make up for the energy shortfall. From 2003 onwards, the parties failed to agree on annual protocols. Instead, bilateral and ad hoc regulations were conducted. These were more opaque than previous regulations; failed to provide for long-term planning; and precluded any possibility of sanctions in case of noncompliance. The consequences became obvious in the winter of 2003-2004. The summer of 2003 brought extraordinarily high precipitation for downstream countries, so they required less water for irrigation at the time. Consequently, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan failed to deliver the agreed amounts of fossil fuels the following winter. To compensate for the loss, Kyrgyzstan generated more hydropower, releasing much more water than usual from the Toktogul Reservoir. The flow could not be absorbed by the frozen riverbed of the Syr Darya or the downstream reservoirs, and it caused severe flooding in Kazakhstan and fears of dam failure at the Shardara Reservoir, where 2000 people were evacuated (Dadabaev, 2005; Sehring and Diebold, 2012).

The frustrations around the failure to establish basin-wide cooperation perceived to be fair by all led to the pursuit of unilateral policies. One example is the 2001 Law on International Use of Water Objects, Water Resources and Water Management Facilities of the Kyrgyz Republic, which stressed the economic

value of water, called for payment of water at the international level, and provoked harsh reactions by Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Usubaliev, 2002).

By the time of the Dushanbe Declaration of 6 October 2002, it became clear that the availability of water for downstream countries in the region could not be separated from the energy generation and consumption concerns of upstream countries. The declaration especially emphasised that earlier agreements on water supply in the CA region needed to be implemented "by taking into account the interests of all countries of the region and by observing the principles of good neighbourhood and mutual respect". Essentially, the Dushanbe Declaration emphasised that the notions of availability of energy supplies to upstream countries were part of the discussions of fair water consumption in the region. In a sense, the Dushanbe Declaration criticised the existing mechanism of IFAS and called for a reform of the executive committee that Tajikistan, along with Kyrgyzstan, considered to be serving the interests of downstream countries.

Tajikistan responded that it intended to intensify the construction of hydroelectric dams for electricity generation to meet its domestic needs. In 2004, it reached an agreement with the Russian Aluminium Company (RusAl) to invest in further construction of the Rogun HPP, which had been started during the Soviet years but came to a halt with independence and a flash flood that destroyed the earlier parts. Soon after a feasibility study in 2006, the official restart of what was planned to be the world's tallest dam, with a height of 335 m, was announced (Menga, 2018).

Nevertheless, there were also collaborative trends on a bilateral level: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan signed a joint agreement in 2002 on the Use of Water Management Facilities of Intergovernmental Status on the Rivers Chu and Talas, which was concluded in the spirit of finding "a more unassailable and fair solution to the efficient use of water management facilities" in compliance with both international law and "the principles of good neighbourly relations, equality, and mutual assistance"; once again, this exemplified how 'neighbourhood' remained the backbone concept behind attempts to facilitate cooperation in water management in the region. In particular, the Chu–Talas agreement showed the commitment of both governments to assume joint responsibility for the maintenance of facilities used for mutual benefit. The agreement confirmed the earlier agreed water allocation scheme of 1983 and obliged Kazakhstan to contribute to the costs of the operation, maintenance, and rehabilitation of dams and reservoirs located in Kyrgyzstan, from which Kazakhstan benefitted then and now. A joint commission was set up in 2006. Members of this commission, which meets twice per year, describe their relations as "like a big close-knit family"[6] and refer to the close ties as being not only amongst themselves as professionals but also between the two nations: "Any Kyrgyz considers a Kazakh a relative, a brother or a sister".[7] The irrelevance of sovereign borders for their professional ethics can also been seen in the following statement: "In principle, we do the same work as in the Soviet Union, just now there are two states".[8]

In summary, in the second phase, we see a trend away from regional towards unilateral action and self-sufficiency policies, although bilateral cooperation on specific issues continues.

Phase 3 (2007-2016): Unilateral interests and political tensions but informal and technical cooperation

Notably, the previous two periods shaped the political environment in the CA region, which has been construed by ethno-nationalist elements as requiring unilateral actions by each government without due concern paid to other water consumers. Although rhetorically most of the leaders of these states remained committed to the norms and neighbourhood, the negative spiral of their relations resulted in

[6] Interview with a Kazakh member of the Chu–Talas Commission, Bishkek, 18 December 2019.

[7] Interview with a Kyrgyz member of the Chu–Talas Commission, Bishkek, 19 December 2019.

[8] Interview with a Kazakh member of the Chu–Talas Commission, 18 December 2019.

attempts, however counterproductive, to seek primarily unilateral solutions to water-related problems. At the same time, one can observe that the need for coordination at the level of practitioners has continued over this period of time, offering some ground for constructing future consensus-based decisions. However, as outlined below, in the majority of cases, these unilateral approaches by political leaders only demonstrated that the practice of coordination and adhering to the benefits of a common neighbourhood was the missing element in producing much-needed compromise.

To exemplify this, starting in 2007-2008, the tensions between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan around the construction of the Rogun Dam grew immensely. The reservoir and associated HPP, built on the Vakhsh River, a major tributary of the Amu Darya, would make Tajikistan less dependent on energy imports and increase its storage capacity for water. How much this reservoir and its filling would actually alter or diminish the water flow of the Amu Darya and water availability downstream was soon an issue of tense debate between these two countries.

Uzbekistan has been involved in various disputes over territory and water with its neighbours for most of its independent history. Uzbekistan's relations with its neighbours are of particular importance because it is located downstream and has the largest agricultural sector in the region. Thus, it is significantly influenced by the water policies of its upstream neighbours, such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan worsened to the extent of a de facto blockade of railway and gas transit to Tajikistan. The tension culminated in a statement about the conflict-prone potential of water issues by the former President Karimov of Uzbekistan, in which he warned that disagreements over water resources would lead to escalating tensions and even wars on every continent (Nurshayeva, 2012). This was quickly taken up by many media outlets to reactivate the water-war rhetoric of the early 1990s. It would be an oversimplification to portray the tension between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as only, or even mainly, rooted in disagreements on water. Rather, observers noted that the personal animosity between both presidents further complicated the possibility of any constructive dialogue and constructed a social environment between the two countries that was unfavourable for practical and mutually acceptable strategies and efforts (Jacoby, 2013; Suyarkulova, 2014).

At the local level, 2010 witnessed another government turnover in Kyrgyzstan, followed by bloody clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south of the country. This intensified the already-complicated relations between the two countries, which played out through the further securitisation of their relations over the following years. This increase in securitisation, seen from the late 1990s through 2005 and onwards, reached the boiling point around 2010 and eventually negatively impacted local transboundary water management when *mirabs* (local water masters) could no longer perform their management duties across borders.

At the same time, however, Kazakhstan strengthened IFAS and its coordination with donors under its chairmanship of 2009-2012. The fact that the Kazakh chairman of the Executive Committee (EC) was a professor and respected *vodnik* (water specialist), not a politician or government official as was usually the case, contributed to the strengthening of the organisation. In 2009, the Central Asian Heads of State at the IFAS summit expressed their readiness to further improve the organisational structure and legal framework of IFAS. The resulting reform efforts, however, stalled after a few years. As a consequence, Kyrgyzstan stopped participating regularly in ICWC meetings and sending its representatives to the Executive Committee of IFAS, especially after Uzbekistan took over the chairmanship. The culmination was the official freezing of Kyrgyzstan's participation in all IFAS structures in 2016.

However, formal institutional mechanisms are only one part of the rules governing water. Often, cooperation – e.g. on water releases during drought times – is based on informal arrangements between water managers across borders that sometimes counteract official policies.[9] These informal ties are especially important when they can counterbalance dysfunctional arrangements or disrupted lines of

[9] Interviews with two international experts, Tashkent, 3 April 2019; informal conversations.

communication in times of political tensions. For example, in the formal ICWC meetings, in which the quarterly water allocation is discussed, there is often hardly room for compromise, as all country delegations have strict instructions from which they cannot divert. Hence, in many situations, no agreement has been reached. At the same time, involved experts report that solutions are often found informally, based on verbal agreements. Such informal channels exemplified by verbal agreements often serve several purposes. As one example, they offer face-saving opportunities to those involved in official decision-making on behalf of their national governments, who by their position have to articulate their own country's stances, which are frequently presented in an uncompromising format. As another example, the informal channels of verbal agreement also facilitate problem-solving, responding to the perceived moral obligation to help 'brotherly' neighbours.

In addition, it is important to note that ICWC meetings do not only consist of formal parts. More important (and often lengthier) is the informal part held outside of the conference format (often at the dinner venues, etc) in small groups attempting to resolve the problems and agree on the minutes.[10] As aforementioned, many senior to high-level technical experts and decision-makers in the water sector have longstanding relationships, sometimes even dating back to joint study and a professional past in the Soviet Union. Even in times of political disagreement, these personal relationships are sustained and make it possible to address issues outside official channels. Technical water experts refer to themselves as *vodniki* (translatable as 'water specialists') and constitute a community sharing similar paradigms and approaches. In particular, the older generation received a joint education in the USSR, which provided them with strong personal ties but also with shared norms on water management. In their cooperative activities, the reference to (imagined) brothers with mutual obligations and longstanding relationships lends legitimacy to individual behaviour that might be against formal rules or orders (such as sharing data or giving access to water). Thanks to this narrative, such behaviour is recognised as appropriate by others.[11]

As shown by Sehring (2021), such official confrontational and informal collaborative practices do not exist in contradiction to each other but are interlinked: sometimes, heads of delegations publicly object to cooperation but instruct their subordinates to collaborate nevertheless.

Additionally, at the very local level, technical water professionals continue their joint operational tasks. Murzakulova (2021, 2022) refers to "the art of neighbourliness" that enabled *mirabs* (local water managers or engineers) to negotiate water regulation in transboundary canals of the Fergana Valley while political dialogue was frozen.

In summary, Phase 3 involved not only confrontation and tensions at the political level but also continued, though informal, collaboration at a more operational level.

Phase 4 (since 2016): Consolidating the regional water neighbourhood

There are two factors that have decisively impacted the regional environment and trust-building in regard to water-related issues in the post-2016 period. These are changes in long-standing leadership and the more frequent utilisation of the mechanism of informal regional consultations in various formats. The key change has been the death of the long-standing dictatorial President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan and the election of President Mirziyoev. In view of the obvious deadlock and inefficiency of the earlier approach, the new leadership in Uzbekistan signalled a drastic departure from the policy of the past. President Mirziyoev has prioritised re-establishing cooperation based on mutual benefit and careful consideration of neighbours' concerns.

[10] Interview, regional expert, 8 July 2020.

[11] Interview with a water expert from Kazakhstan, 23 September 2019.

The newly established tool of informal consultations reintroduced after 2016, has been instrumental in signalling such a change in policy to Uzbekistan's neighbours and arriving at difficult compromises, as exemplified by the Uzbek agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan explained in the section below.

Since the turn of regional hydropolitics towards cooperation in 2016, political leaders have increased their references to brotherly ties. Already on the occasion of Mirziyoev's first visit to Tajikistan, Tajik President Rahmon in his press statement referred three times to the "brotherly people of Uzbekistan", and both presidents addressed each other repeatedly as "dear brother" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan , 2018). This set the tone for changing the previous tensions around the Rogun Dam to a collaborative approach. In 2018, when Tajik president Rahmon arrived for his first-ever state visit to Uzbekistan, Uzbek president Mirziyoev stated, "Uzbeks and Tajiks are like two branches of one tree, like two banks of one river" (Eurasianet, 2018).

Although informal meetings occasionally happened before the change of leaders, the biggest change towards an understanding of the importance of such meetings, in general and for water management, took place after 2016, following the change of leadership in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. This shift was particularly important in addressing the need for an approach that would consider the concerns of both downstream and upstream countries.

After 2016, several such region-wide multilateral informal consultative meetings among the heads of state were held, with the first one in Nur-Sultan (today's Astana) in March 2018, the second one in Tashkent in November 2019, and the third one in Ashgabat in August 2021. These meetings essentially served several main purposes. The first purpose was to construct regional trust and unity and create an environment for working out regional approaches to regional problems. The second was to create an informal signalling platform based on the shared values of 'brotherly' relations amongst neighbouring states for an open dialogue on vital issues. The third was to search for operationalisable formats to achieve the objectives of all parties without damaging (but ideally, forwarding) the prospects of the other regional states. Although these may resemble functionalist approaches to cooperation (Tolipov, 2019), the fact that they were based on shared values and identities and forwarded through the informal channels of consultations and subnational diplomacy demonstrates that they were not necessarily aimed at tackling technical issues in the small policy area, as prescribed by functionalist theory. Rather, these meetings need to be understood as a part of the social construction of the neighbourhood, which could also lead to the resolution of problematic areas.

There were a few decisions achieved during these meetings, paving the way for common water management practices based on the notion of the good neighbourhood in the region. In particular, by the time of the second meeting, Kyrgyz President Zhenebekov and Uzbek President Mirziyoev agreed in principle on the need to create a water and energy consortium (first modelled in 1998) to place the issues and water into a regional sharing scheme.

In 2018, Turkmenistan took over the Chairmanship of IFAS, and the first IFAS Summit of the heads of state since 2009 took place. The Kyrgyz president also participated as an invited guest. In the joint communique, the presidents:

> confirmed their commitment to earlier decisions on joint and integrated management and rational use of water resources and environmental protection in the Aral Sea basin taking into account interests of all countries in the region on the *principles of good-neighbourliness* and mutual respect. Presidents underlined the necessity of further development and strengthening relations of equal and mutually beneficial cooperation in interstate watercourses use and *protection in the spirit of the centuries-old friendship of peoples with deep historical roots, common culture, customs, and traditions*. (Joint Communiqué of the Council of the Heads of State – founders of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, of 24 August 2018, emphasis added)

In 2019 and 2021, two consultative meetings among the CA countries' heads of state took place. The joint statements published after both meetings stressed the need for strengthened collaboration to address

environmental challenges, including water resources management. Both also explicitly addressed the water-energy nexus, and the 2021 statement acknowledged the importance of both existing and newly constructed HPPs in the region. Again, there was a reference to the "fraternal ties" between the peoples of the CA countries (CAWATERInfo, 2019, Joint Statement, Article 3). It is important to note that in the authoritarian and hierarchical decision-making culture of the Central Asian states, the official outcome documents of these consultative meetings form an important guideline for policy-makers and are considered equal to formal legal agreements. The spirit of these informal meetings also led the heads of state to request that IFAS develop roadmaps for practical implementation of achieved agreements and provide control over the way these agreements would be fulfilled. By doing so, these meetings again confirmed IFAS as the most important regional platform for the solution of water management problems. The Turkmen Chairmanship of IFAS restarted the discussion of improvements in the organisational structure. Kyrgyzstan has still frozen its membership in IFAS, despite the calls by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for it to return (Kozhaniyazov, 2021; Nurimbetov, 2021). However, it actively participates in the working group on the reform process with observer status. Currently, this reform process has been continued by the Tajik chairmanship.

The last years also registered significant progress in bilateral ties following informal consultations. As a part of this progress, Uzbekistan has taken steps to improve its ties with both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which has resulted in the removal of Uzbekistan's objections to the construction of hydroelectric dams in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and even the suggestion that Uzbekistan could take part in these projects by providing much-needed financing and a workforce for these projects. This enabled and was followed up by a number of bilateral agreements, such as the 2017 Kyrgyz–Uzbek Agreement on the Orto–Tokoi (Kasansai) Reservoir, the 2018 Tajik–Uzbek Agreement on the Operation of the Farkhad Dam, the 2017 Turkmen–Uzbek Agreement on Water Cooperation, the 2021 Agreement on Establishing an Uzbek–Turkmen Water Commission, and the 2022 Agreement on the Andijan/Kempir–Abad Reservoir between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Fergana news agency, 2022). While the last sparked protest among the local Kyrgyz population, the Kyrgyz president stressed its importance for "the development of cooperation with brotherly Uzbekistan. For us, Uzbekistan is a close neighbour, a loyal friend, and a reliable strategic partner" (President.kg, 2023). In early 2023, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan agreed on a roadmap for the construction of the previously controversial Kambarata I Dam.

In addition to informal discussions at the highest level, informal dialogues and discussions at the subnational level have proven to be of incremental importance in solidifying support for informed decision-making at the presidential level. There are two subcategories of subnational dialogue that can be located in the region. The first is at the level of municipalities with mutual visits between the members of local communities, best exemplified by the case of the Ferghana Valley. In April 2021, the leaders of the provinces of Sughd (Tajikistan), Ferghana (Uzbekistan), and Batken (Kyrgyzstan) held a business forum under the slogan of 'Integration of Border Regions – a Guarantee of Development'. As a result, a statement of intent to cooperate between the regions of Sughd and Ferghana was signed. This has become the first meeting of its kind between subnational actors on matters that have traditionally been addressed only and primarily at the national level (Asia Plus, 2021; Hovar, 2021). This again demonstrated that for areas such as the Ferghana Valley, neighbourhood ties are intrinsically connected to the functionality of their nationhood, and without proper subnational ties, exercising rights for land and water within national boundaries is difficult, if not impossible. These meetings were continued in 2022, and the goal of these meetings was to link not only politicians and community activists but also agricultural actors in order to facilitate mutual learning (Asia Plus, 2022).

In the same spirit as the common neighbourhood, a cooperation agreement between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan on a joint response to natural disaster risks has been developed. As the outcome of such an agreement, both countries settled compensation payments for losses related to the breach of the Sardoba Reservoir (Uzbekistan) in 2020, when the dam was damaged and the eventual flood of water from the reservoir damaged households not only in Uzbekistan but also in neighbouring Kazakhstan.

While fraternity is being celebrated at high-level meetings, at the same time, populist and nationalist policies and rhetoric have been increasing in some countries. Although the opening of the borders after 2016 eased the movement of people, the borders as such were strengthened and remain an impediment to local water management. Along with the delineation and securitisation of borders, this has sparked local worries and resistance on the ground. In 2021 and 2022, tensions in the border areas of the Fergana Valley escalated into violent and deadly conflicts between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Water infrastructure and access to water played a role in these conflicts as well, and they affected general relations between both countries and hence their cooperation on water both bilaterally and at the regional level. The Kembir–Abad agreement between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was contested by local civil society, as aforementioned, and led to a harsh crackdown against opposition politicians and activists (RFE/RL, 2022). At the same time, however, shortly after the 2021 incidents, Tajikistan offered and supplied additional electricity to Kyrgyzstan to overcome an acute shortage (Dadabaev, 2021).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our review of more than 30 years of hydropolitics in Central Asia, as outlined in the sections above, demonstrates that conflict and cooperation have continually coexisted, although with different intensities at different times.

Nevertheless, as narrated throughout this paper, the process of regional water governance in Central Asia has undergone different stages over this period. It went from initial formalised regional cooperation to the stage of 'resource nationalism', with more unilateral or at most bilateral and informal cooperation. It then saw a period of strong political tensions that were counterbalanced by informal and technical cooperation. The past few years have seen a reconstitution of high-level regional water cooperation, with a top-down attitude that has been partly contested from below.

As we argue in this paper, this contrasts with the 'snapshot' narrative presented by rationalist studies of water in the region, in which water relations between regional states are painted using the structure of binary opposition of conflicts vs. cooperation dichotomy. The social construction of ties and the ongoing journey of these states towards more consolidated approaches to a regional water neighbourhood is supported by regional norms and commitments, such as recognition of fraternal relations amongst themselves or collective decision-making in an informal setting as a preferred format for the discussion of complicated issues in the region. The notion of the spirit of brotherhood, which is often referred to in the interstate context, documents another guiding principle in dealing with water, which implies the need for a just approach without overlooking the interests of other regional states. The processes of water neighbourhood construction particularly intensified after the changes in political leadership in several countries of the region. As described in the sections above, with the leadership turnover in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan and more frequent contact between all the leaders of the CA states, we see new features of problem-solving between them, such as the norms of mutual assistance, the acts of brotherhood and fraternity (*birodarlik, kardoshlik,* and *baurlastyk*), and informal collective decision-making (*maslahat*) in regard to various issues, including water management and water sharing.

Attempts to resolve disagreements over water have been built on linguistic, cultural, religious, and other identity-related similarities amongst countries. We have framed this value-based commitment to water sharing as a 'regional water neighbourhood'. We could observe that there have been phases where this commitment was expressed at local and technical levels in order to continue cooperation despite tensions and confrontational positions at high political levels, and phases where this commitment was expressed by the political leadership (and sometimes contested at the domestic level) to substantiate renewed and strengthened cooperation. The features that political leaders as well as technical water managers and water users have emphasised in constructing their relations over the years were notions of a shared regional identity. This component is based on affective aspects such as the ideas of mutual

ties and evolving responsibilities, which are neglected by many constructivist studies but are crucial for the shapes and forms that water cooperation can take as a result of the social construction of relations amongst regional states. This paper, therefore, builds upon and extends these constructivist approaches and illustrates that, over the years, CA states have operated with the notion that they belong to the same regional neighbourhood, with water resources being a common good.

Furthermore, the notion of the neighbourhood is featured as one of the main pillars of communication with each other even at times when their relations have been strained. Seeing themselves as a 'water neighbourhood' means that "for these states, the notions of 'regional sovereignty' or 'sharing' their sovereignty do not necessarily contradict or preclude their nationhood or national development" (Dadabaev, 2021: 5), which is an idea that is incompatible with positivist, Western understandings of national sovereignty. The importance of neighbourhoods is not only stressed at the political level but also refers to social interactions at the level of everyday life, as exemplified in many proverbs in CA countries (Dadabaev, 2021). It can also be found in the "rural ethics of neighbourhood interdependence", which was observed by Murzakulova (2021) and which she clearly differentiated from other types of collaborative interaction. In such a setting, even the threats of water wars articulated by Uzbekistan under Karimov can be seen rather as a discursive communicative strategy of desperation to influence the position of their neighbours (for example, the Tajiks whom Karimov called the same nation but speaking a different language, when compared to his own Uzbek population), who had been unwilling to shift their position.

Thus, the idea of the neighbourhood is a strong factor for water collaboration in Central Asia, as it comes with certain norms of solidarity and joint responsibility. Similarly, the reference to brotherhood is much more than a symbolic element for political speeches and preambles to agreements. However, it is not a factor that prevails over power asymmetries or interest politics – be they framed as 'national interests' or otherwise. The idea of the neighbourhood is neither just rhetoric evoked in some preambles and speeches, nor is it an altruistic and inclusive joint identity that overcomes all other inequalities. It is a strong and intrinsic value in the region that guides behaviour, but this does not exclude that it is also employed strategically.

As these processes are in the making, the outcome of such water-neighbourhood construction is difficult to predict. However, if the water and energy exchange mechanisms discussed in 1992 and 1998 can be further supported and strengthened through the norms and values of a regional water neighbourhood, then these could serve as a model for constructing regional shared sovereignty over water and may eventually contribute to stronger CA regional identity construction in international relations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Parts of the current study have been funded by the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science Grant-in-Aid for scientific research No. 21K12400 and No. 21H00686, by the Nippon Foundation Grant for Sustainable Development Goals, a grant from the Ministry of Innovation of Uzbekistan, and the Water and Development Partnership Programme supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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