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Establishing International Cooperation In The Use Of Transboundary Water Resources In Uzbekistan: Historical Approach And Contemporary Measures

Hikmatjon Kenjayevich Avezov

PhD Candidate, Department of "History of Uzbekistan," Faculty of History, National University of Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the Republic of Uzbekistan's efforts to establish international cooperation in the management of transboundary water resources, with particular attention to the Amu Darya and Syr Darya river basins. Situating the issue within a historical perspective, the study critically examines the evolution of regional water policies from the Soviet era to the post-independence period, highlighting Uzbekistan's initiatives, collaboration with international organizations, and the conceptual development of water diplomacy. The analysis underscores how historical legacies and contemporary challenges have shaped both bilateral and multilateral approaches to water governance in Central Asia. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on hydro-political relations and the role of water diplomacy in fostering regional stability, ecological sustainability, and socio-economic development.

Keywords: Transboundary watercourses, Amu Darya, Syr Darya, hydro-diplomacy, regional cooperation, Uzbekistan, Central Asia, ecological security.

Introduction: The governance of transboundary water resources has long represented one of the most complex and contested challenges in international relations, requiring a delicate balance between political, economic, and ecological considerations. Nowhere is this issue more acute than in Central Asia, where the primary rivers—the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya—traverse the territories of multiple sovereign states. As a lower riparian country, Uzbekistan is particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in water allocation, since any alteration in distribution directly affects its agriculture, industry, and access to drinking water.

Against this backdrop, the establishment of effective and equitable mechanisms of international water cooperation has become a matter of strategic priority for Uzbekistan's foreign policy. The aim of this article is to provide a historically grounded and theoretically informed analysis of Uzbekistan's approach to transboundary water management, tracing the evolution of regional cooperation frameworks from the Soviet period through the post-independence era. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of international organizations and the conceptual emergence of "water diplomacy" as a tool for promoting regional stability, ecological sustainability, and socio-economic integration.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The Central Asian states inherited a range of unresolved water-related challenges from the former Soviet Union, many of which remain salient to this day. Among these, perhaps the most consequential for the collective future of the region is the legacy of the unified irrigation system that was artificially constructed under Soviet rule. During the Soviet period, Central Asia was largely treated as a resource base for agricultural production, with Uzbekistan designated primarily for cotton cultivation and Kazakhstan for grain and livestock production. This sectoral specialization led to the large-scale reclamation of desert territories, the establishment of collective and state farms, and the redirection of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya through an extensive network of canals and drainage systems. As a result, a

centralized irrigation system emerged that deeply shaped the socio-economic and ecological landscape of the region.

The Soviet system of centralized water management, particularly the massive expansion of irrigation infrastructure between the 1960s and 1980s, contributed directly to the ecological catastrophe of the Aral Sea. Although quotas were formally used to distribute water among the republics, decision-making authority was concentrated in Moscow, depriving the republics of autonomy. The ecological consequences of this approach became increasingly evident, underscoring the vulnerability of the region to externally imposed water policies.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Central Asian republics embraced sovereignty and national independence as guiding principles, thereby replacing the notion of a shared socialist future with national priorities and interests. In this new context, the question of how much water each state was entitled to use quickly reemerged as a highly contentious issue. Downstream states, whose economies were heavily dependent on irrigated agriculture, remained tied to the Soviet-era system and thus found themselves in frequent conflict with upstream states that were recalibrating their own priorities.

One of the most persistent disputes arose over the water–energy nexus. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, located upstream at the headwaters of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, relied primarily on water for hydropower generation. By contrast, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, positioned downstream, required large quantities of water for irrigation, particularly for cotton and wheat production. If upstream countries released excessive volumes of water in winter to meet their energy demands, downstream states faced severe shortages during the peak irrigation season. The absence of legally binding frameworks to regulate these trade-offs exacerbated the situation, prompting the signing of the 1992 Agreement on the Joint Management, Use, and Protection of Water Resources by Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. This agreement marked the first step toward a regionally coordinated approach to transboundary water governance.

Nevertheless, the 1992 Agreement, as well as the Bishkek Agreement of 1998 concerning the Syr Darya basin, fell short of expectations. A combination of economic transformation, demographic growth, and unequal patterns of water consumption limited their effectiveness. Notably, Uzbekistan's population nearly doubled in the two decades following independence, while Kazakhstan's demographic growth was comparatively modest. This divergence rendered the earlier water quotas increasingly obsolete. Furthermore, both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan recorded per capita water consumption far above global averages. According to Water Footprint data, Uzbekistan's annual per capita water use reached 146 m^3, while Kazakhstan's rose to 1,277.5 m^3, both significantly higher than internationally accepted norms.

Kyrgyzstan, as an upstream country, intensified its focus on hydropower development to meet growing domestic energy demands. While this was a rational response to internal needs, it exacerbated downstream shortages, particularly in Kazakhstan. Consequently, Kazakhstan has consistently advocated for a revision of existing agreements, calling for the establishment of binding conventions under international law with clearly defined quotas. In this context, the 1992 Helsinki Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes is often invoked. This convention, grounded in the principle of equitable and reasonable use, explicitly prohibits unilateral appropriation or commercialization of shared water resources, designating them instead as common property.

Effective governance of transboundary water resources thus requires integrated and cross-sectoral approaches. Coordination among different sectors and stakeholders, including local communities residing within the river basins, is essential to ensure sustainable outcomes. Mapping the roles, mandates, and responsibilities of all stakeholders enables the design of joint strategies for water resource management. Inclusive participation at all stages—from risk assessment to the selection of mitigation measures—is a determinant factor in ensuring the success of transboundary cooperation. Empirical research further demonstrates that such cooperation enhances energy and food production, strengthens resilience to natural disasters, and promotes regional economic integration.

At present, the emergence of new challenges underscores the need for a more comprehensive international legal framework under the auspices of the United Nations. A particularly pressing concern is Afghanistan's canal construction project, which threatens to reduce the annual flow of the Amu Darya by as much as 25%. It is therefore crucial to involve Afghanistan in any future regional agreements, despite the current instability in the country. The development of a UN-backed convention on transboundary water use in Central Asia would provide a stronger foundation for sustainable and equitable water governance,

ensuring that each state's interests are safeguarded while preventing conflict.

Uzbekistan has played a leading role in promoting regional cooperation through a series of initiatives. In the 2000s, the country collaborated with the World Bank, the European Union, and the UN on programs to mitigate the Aral Sea crisis. In 2018, it hosted the first International Water Forum in Tashkent, advancing the idea of strengthening regional cooperation on transboundary waters. Since 2020, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has institutionalized the concept of "water diplomacy," emphasizing the role of water resources as a means of fostering peace and cooperation rather than as a source of political leverage.

Despite persistent challenges—including inequitable water distribution, ecological concerns related to upstream hydropower projects, and outdated irrigation infrastructure—the constructive diplomatic approach of Uzbekistan provides grounds for cautious optimism. By adhering to the principle of "one region – shared interests," Uzbekistan continues to position water not as a tool of pressure, but as the cornerstone of regional development and mutual benefit.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Republic of Uzbekistan, drawing upon its historical experiences, has increasingly prioritized the formulation of sustainable and inclusive principles of cooperation in the management of transboundary water resources. Through the adoption of modern diplomatic instruments, the country seeks to transform water from a source of contention into a vehicle for regional stability, ecological balance, and socio-economic progress. Regional security, ecological sustainability, and long-term development in Central Asia are inextricably linked to the equitable allocation and rational use of shared water resources.

In March 2024, this commitment was once again reaffirmed when the Chairperson of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis, Tanzila Narbayeva, met with the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Central Asia, Kaha Imnadze. The dialogue underscored the strategic significance of Uzbekistan's cooperation with the United Nations and its specialized agencies, particularly in preventive diplomacy, counter-terrorism, peacebuilding, and the joint management of water and energy resources. Imnadze emphasized Uzbekistan's constructive role in strengthening peace, stability, and growth across the region.

As outlined throughout this study, Uzbekistan's proactive initiatives and political will have been decisive in shaping historic agreements that seek to safeguard the needs of its population, economy, and future generations. By consistently advocating the rational and integrated use of transboundary water and energy resources, while maintaining a firm commitment to the ecological stability of Central Asia, Uzbekistan has emerged as a key actor in regional hydro-diplomacy.

Based on the findings presented, several key recommendations can be advanced:

Strengthening international legal mechanisms: Central Asian republics should enhance binding legal frameworks for the joint management of transboundary water resources, ensuring compliance with international norms and principles.

Establishing a unified regional monitoring system: Such a system is necessary to promote transparency and guarantee that principles of fairness and equity in water allocation are respected across the region.

Capacity building in water diplomacy: Considering the steadily growing demand for water due to demographic expansion, it is vital to develop specialized training programs and research centers dedicated to water diplomacy and regional cooperation.

Long-term water–energy exchange agreements: To address the challenges posed by climate change and declining natural resources, Central Asian states should conclude durable agreements on water–energy trade-offs, ensuring that cooperation remains viable in the decades ahead.

Taken together, these recommendations not only hold significance for Central Asia, but also provide valuable lessons for other regions of the world confronting similar transboundary water challenges. They demonstrate how constructive diplomacy, grounded in mutual interests and ecological responsibility, can transform a potential source of conflict into a foundation for shared prosperity.

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