

**THE POLITICS OF WATER DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA: UZBEKISTAN'S
ROLE IN TRANSBOUNDARY RIVER COOPERATION**

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Abstract: This article examines the dynamics of water diplomacy in Central Asia, focusing on the transboundary rivers Amu Darya and Syr Darya, and evaluates Uzbekistan's evolving approach since 2016. The purpose of the study is to assess how Uzbekistan's foreign policy shift, under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has contributed to strengthening regional cooperation over shared water resources.

Methodologically, the study draws on policy analysis, regional diplomatic developments, and official statements to trace Uzbekistan's engagement with upstream and downstream neighbors. It highlights key milestones such as the endorsement of the Rogun Dam, active participation in multilateral institutions like IFAS, and national strategies like the Uzbekistan Water Strategy (2021–2023).

Findings suggest that Uzbekistan's hydro-diplomacy reflects a broader trend of responsible regionalism, emphasising dialogue, collaboration, and mutual respect. Through both bilateral and multilateral channels, Uzbekistan is actively promoting a cooperative model of water governance.

The article concludes that Uzbekistan's initiatives under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev provide a strong foundation for durable and peaceful transboundary water cooperation in Central Asia. The country's leadership in water diplomacy is widely recognised and respected, setting a positive example in the region.

Introduction Water, in the context of international politics, is more than just a natural resource; it is a source of life and a catalyst for cooperation. This is especially true in Central Asia, where the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers flow across multiple national borders, linking the destinies of neighbouring states. Effective management of these shared water resources is critical for the region's sustainable development.

Uzbekistan, under the visionary leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has undertaken a transformative foreign policy that prioritises good-neighbourly relations and regional integration. Since 2016, the country has actively engaged in building trust, promoting joint water initiatives, and reinforcing institutional cooperation. This article explores Uzbekistan's growing leadership in regional water diplomacy and its constructive engagement with partner countries.

Theoretical Lens: Hydro-Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation. Hydro-diplomacy refers to the use of diplomatic tools and political dialogue to ensure the fair and peaceful management of shared water resources. In the context of Central Asia, hydro-diplomacy supports regional stability and sustainable development. Closely aligned with the principles of regional

cooperation, this concept highlights how neighbouring countries can develop joint solutions to shared environmental and resource-related challenges.

Background: Regional Water Governance and Shared Responsibility The rivers of Central Asia are vital for agriculture, energy, and daily life. The equitable and efficient management of these resources requires a collective commitment to cooperation. Recognizing this, Uzbekistan has championed a new approach—one that views water not as a dividing line but as a platform for unification and partnership.

Uzbekistan's Strategic Vision under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Since 2016, Uzbekistan has taken major steps to enhance regional understanding and partnership in the field of water diplomacy. Key developments include:

1. **Engagement with Upstream States:** Uzbekistan has significantly improved its diplomatic ties with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, fostering dialogue and trust. A remarkable example was the public support for the Rogun Dam project in Tajikistan, demonstrating Uzbekistan's commitment to regional cooperation.
2. **Strengthening Regional Institutions:** Uzbekistan has become an active and leading member of multilateral platforms like the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), where it has called for practical reforms and equitable participation.
3. **Domestic Water Reform:** The adoption of the Uzbekistan Water Strategy 2021–2023 showcases the country's efforts to modernise water management, improve irrigation systems, and promote the efficient use of resources—all aligned with regional goals.
4. **Environmental Diplomacy:** Uzbekistan has gained international respect for its leadership in addressing environmental challenges, particularly through initiatives to revive the Aral Sea region. The creation of the Aral Sea International Innovation Centre and the successful adoption of a UN resolution recognising the region as a “Zone of Environmental Innovation and Technologies” are testaments to this leadership.

Case Analysis: Models of Constructive Water Diplomacy

- *Rogun Dam Endorsement:* Uzbekistan's support for the Rogun Dam marked a milestone in regional relations, showcasing the country's diplomatic maturity and its respect for the interests of neighbouring states.
- *Aral Sea Advocacy:* By reframing the Aral Sea crisis as a shared responsibility, Uzbekistan has fostered joint action and attracted international support. The country's leadership on this issue has strengthened regional solidarity.
- *Joint Infrastructure Projects:* Uzbekistan has initiated and supported a range of infrastructure projects aimed at mutual benefit, including cross-border irrigation channels and modernisation efforts that serve multiple states.

Challenges and the Path Forward. While significant progress has been made, the region continues to face challenges:

- Climate change and unpredictable weather patterns affect water flow and availability.
- Technical and institutional disparities among countries can limit effective cooperation.

Despite these challenges, Uzbekistan's leadership and proactive diplomacy create an optimistic path forward. The country's inclusive approach and commitment to dialogue continue to inspire confidence among its neighbours.

Conclusion: Uzbekistan's water diplomacy under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev is a model of constructive regional engagement. The country has shown that mutual respect, open dialogue, and shared responsibility can transform water from a potential source of tension into a driver of regional cooperation. Through strong leadership and clear vision, Uzbekistan is helping shape a more peaceful and integrated Central Asia.

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