

Water diplomacy in Central Asia: A path to trust and cooperation



The international scientific-practical conference titled “Water Diplomacy in Central Asia: Trust, Dialogue, and Multilateral Cooperation for Sustainable Development”, held in Tashkent on 10 April this year, generated significant interest among international partners.

The forum brought together over 100 participants from more than 10 countries and 15 international and regional organizations, uniting representatives from all the countries that share the basins of Central Asia’s two major rivers – Amudarya and Syrdarya. A particularly notable achievement was the participation of a delegation from Afghanistan in the multilateral dialogue for the first time, signaling a readiness for constructive engagement with the Central Asian states.

Conference participants emphasized that in the face of growing water scarcity risks – affecting not only the region but the world at large – water diplomacy is becoming increasingly relevant as a promising avenue for international cooperation. The forum is expected to contribute not only to the sustainable momentum of mutually beneficial water cooperation in Central Asia but also to shaping the global water-climate agenda.



Caroline Milow, Director of Regional Programs of the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), noted that water diplomacy is gaining urgency amid climate change and intensifying water stress. “Today, water is no longer just a natural resource – it is a strategic asset, a source of life. This is particularly evident in Central Asia, which is experiencing the consequences of climate change, the accelerated melting of glaciers, and an increase in extreme weather events. This is why water diplomacy and integrated water resource management have become critically important”, she stated.

Caroline Milow also stressed that the existing potential for cooperation enables the use of water diplomacy as a tool for building trust among nations. This approach can transform shared water resources into a solid foundation for sustainable development and regional stability.



Lisa Marina Gump, Regional Adviser on Water and Climate Change of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), expressed a similar view. She noted that “water diplomacy is the key to successfully addressing issues in water resource management” and stressed the importance of involving the academic community in this process.

Jennifer Sehring, Associate Professor in Water Resources Management and Diplomacy at the International Water Resources Institute (Netherlands), pointed out that water diplomacy efforts beyond the government sector and the scientific community should include civil society, youth, and local communities. “Only such a comprehensive approach will allow for a true understanding of the nature of water-related problems and help develop solutions that are both effective and sustainable”, she stated.



Barbara Janusz-Pawletta, Head of the Regional Representative Office for Central Asia of the International Water Management Institute, remarked that “water diplomacy goes beyond simple cooperation – it is a strategic framework aimed at ensuring all parties’ interests are taken into account and preventing potential conflicts. This requires a scientific approach and reliable data”. She added that such an approach is especially relevant given the current favorable political climate in the region, which opens up new opportunities for expanding water cooperation.

In this context, Uzbekistan's efforts to conceptualize water diplomacy and promote it as a distinct area of intergovernmental engagement received high praise. Barbara Janusz-Pawletta states, "Uzbekistan, located at the heart of Central Asia, plays a crucial role and holds great potential for promoting water diplomacy dialogue between regional countries and Afghanistan".

The importance of forming a shared vision for the effective use of transboundary water resources amid today's challenges and threats to Central Asia's water security was repeatedly stressed, along with the potential for water diplomacy to serve as a model of cooperation not only within the region but on a global scale.

Experts noted that the water-climate agenda, once seen as a divisive factor among Central Asian countries, is now evolving into a catalyst for regional collaboration.

Philipp Jahn, Regional Director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Germany) in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, emphasized that "water diplomacy serves as a basis for rapprochement and active cooperation among the Central Asian countries". He highlighted the importance of the participation of all five Central Asian states and Afghanistan, as addressing water issues in the region requires building an open and inclusive dialogue.



Philipp Jahn also pointed out that Central Asia has accumulated considerable experience. Centuries of cooperation, including in the water sphere, have become a core element of regional cohesion. Now is the right moment for Central Asia and Afghanistan to unite efforts to address transboundary water management challenges.



Philippe Saprykin, Deputy Head of the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, Senior Political Affairs Advisor, praised the level of water cooperation in the region, emphasizing that "favorable conditions for water cooperation have been established in Central Asia". He expressed confidence that the conference and its proposals would significantly contribute to water security and promote regional stability and sustainable development.

Charity Watson, Advisor on Climate, Peace, and Security for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, expressed her conviction that "Afghanistan's participation in the dialogue will help unlock solutions to many issues surrounding the joint use of water resources, in a spirit of good neighborliness and mutual benefit".



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