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FROM ARMS CONTROL TO WATER GOVERNANCE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR APPLYING CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES TO TRANSBOUNDARY WATER DIPLOMACY

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Abstract: This article develops a conceptual framework for transferring confidence-building measures (CBMs) from the field of arms control to transboundary water diplomacy. It brings together two bodies of scholarship that have so far developed in parallel: the Water Diplomacy Framework proposed by Islam and Susskind, and the classical CBM literature rooted in the Helsinki process and early United Nations disarmament research. The article argues that the two traditions share a structural kinship. Both treat conflict as a product of uncertainty, information deficits and mistrust rather than of physical scarcity alone. Both prefer procedural and incremental solutions to comprehensive settlements. On this basis, the article proposes a three-dimensional model of water-related CBMs, distinguishing informational, verificational and restraining measures, and assesses each dimension against three criteria: uncertainty reduction, escalation prevention and continuity. The model is then applied illustratively to the Amu Darya basin, where the exclusion of Afghanistan from the post-Soviet water governance architecture has produced a pronounced institutional asymmetry. The comparison reveals a functioning but incomplete CBM regime among the five post-Soviet riparian states, and an effectively pre-institutional situation in relations with Afghanistan. The article concludes that CBMs offer a workable intermediate mechanism between purely technical water management and formal treaty-making in basins where legal instruments are politically unavailable. The framework is offered as an analytical tool that can be extended to other asymmetric basins, including the Nile and the Mekong.

Keywords: confidence-building measures; water diplomacy; transboundary water governance; institutional asymmetry; Amu Darya; Qosh Tepa Canal

Highlights

- Water diplomacy and confidence-building theory rest on the same diagnosis of conflict.
- The classical CBM typology transfers to transboundary water contexts with little modification.
- A three-dimensional model of informational, verificational and restraining CBMs is proposed.
- Applied to the Amu Darya, the model exposes a sharp asymmetry between two engagement tracks.
- CBMs offer an intermediate mechanism where formal treaty-making is politically blocked.

1. Introduction

The study of transboundary water conflict has long been shaped by two separate intellectual traditions. The first grew out of hydraulic engineering and international water law. It treats water disputes as problems of allocation and legal entitlement, and it looks for solutions in treaties, quotas and technical standards. The second grew out of international security studies. It treats interstate

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conflict as a product of mistrust, misperception and information asymmetry, and it looks for solutions in procedures that make behaviour more predictable. The two traditions rarely speak to each other. This article argues that their convergence is not merely desirable but analytically necessary for basins where the political conditions for legal solutions do not exist.

The Amu Darya basin illustrates the problem clearly. Since 2022, the Taliban government of Afghanistan has been building the Qosh Tepa Canal, a large diversion scheme in the northern provinces. The project has turned a long-standing institutional asymmetry into an urgent hydropolitical issue. Afghanistan holds part of the basin's catchment and contributes a significant share of the river's flow, yet it remains outside the regional water governance architecture created by the five post-Soviet states through the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC, established in 1992) and the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS, established in 1993). The absence of broad diplomatic recognition of the government in Kabul further limits the prospect of a treaty-based solution. This raises a general question with wide relevance beyond Central Asia: what mechanisms remain available for building predictable relations over a shared river when the classical instruments of international water law are politically out of reach?

This article argues that confidence-building measures provide such a mechanism. CBMs have a fifty-year record in international security. They were designed precisely for situations in which parties distrust each other, cannot agree on substantive terms, and yet need to avoid unintended escalation. The claim advanced here is that the same logic applies to shared rivers, and that the classical CBM typology can be transferred to water governance with only modest adaptation.

The article makes three contributions. First, it identifies and specifies the structural kinship between water diplomacy scholarship and CBM theory, moving beyond loose analogy to a set of testable propositions. Second, it develops a three-dimensional analytical model of water-related CBMs together with explicit assessment criteria, so that the completeness of a cooperation architecture can be described in comparable terms across basins and across time. Third, it applies the model illustratively to the Amu Darya basin and shows that the same basin can host, simultaneously, a mature CBM regime on one track and a pre-institutional situation on another.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of water diplomacy and of CBMs, and identifies the gap in the literature. Section 3 sets out four propositions on the structural kinship between the two traditions. Section 4 develops the adapted three-dimensional model and its assessment criteria. Section 5 applies the model to the Amu Darya basin. Section 6 discusses scope conditions, limitations and objections. Section 7 concludes.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Water diplomacy: from technical management to negotiated governance

The term “water diplomacy” entered scholarly use at the turn of the 2000s and 2010s. It marked a shift away from purely technical and purely legal approaches to shared rivers. The foundational statement is the monograph of Islam and Susskind (2012), which proposed the Water Diplomacy Framework (WDF). The central methodological claim of the WDF is that water systems are not simply natural objects. They are complex networks in which natural, societal and political subsystems interact continuously and unpredictably (Islam & Susskind, 2012). On this account, attempts to manage such networks by unilateral engineering intervention, or by rigid legal regulation alone, are likely to fail. They fail because they treat as fixed what is in fact uncertain and contested.

Institutional definitions complement this framework. The Stockholm International Water Institute describes water diplomacy as the full range of actions taken by state and non-state actors to

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prevent or peacefully settle disputes over water, and to promote cooperation on availability, allocation and use (SIWI). The Blue Peace Initiative frames water as a possible instrument of international relations rather than only as an object of them (Blue Peace Initiative). In a synthesising review, Sehring et al. (2022) converge on an understanding of water diplomacy as a set of deliberative political processes aimed at preventing and settling disputes over shared waters, using foreign-policy instruments that reach beyond the water sector itself.

One feature of water diplomacy matters particularly for the argument developed here: its multi-track character. Alongside official interstate interaction (Track 1), water diplomacy includes semi-official formats involving former officials and experts (Track 1.5), purely expert and scholarly dialogue (Track 2), and engagement with civil society and local communities (Track 3). This architecture becomes decisive when Track 1 is institutionally blocked, as it is in relations between Afghanistan and its northern neighbours.

2.2. Confidence-building measures: origins and evolution

The concept of confidence-building measures emerged during the Cold War. Historical accounts trace the phrase to informal discussions of military questions within the CSCE process, where a proposal to introduce security-enhancing measures was merged with the existing category of confidence-building measures, producing the composite term confidence- and security-building measures used in later documents (Capie & Evans, 2007). The concept received its broadest institutional expression in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and was elaborated in the Vienna Document series (OSCE, 2011).

The most systematic early typology was set out in the 1985 study published by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR, 1985). It distinguished three categories of measure. Information measures cover the exchange of data on forces, structures and activities. Verification measures cover mechanisms for checking compliance, including inspection and observation. Constraint measures cover restrictions on specific activities that would otherwise create the potential for surprise action. This tripartite structure has proved durable, and it forms the basis of the model developed in Section 4.

A second element of the CBM literature is methodologically important here. Alongside the enumerative view, which treats CBMs as a list of discrete instruments, there is a procedural view, which treats confidence building as a process that transforms relations between parties over time (UNIDIR, 1985; Capie & Evans, 2007). On the procedural view, the value of any single measure lies less in its own content than in its contribution to a sequence. Confidence building is understood as an activity aimed at incremental improvement in specific aspects of an otherwise antagonistic relationship. This reading is productive for water contexts. In a contested basin, no single signed document resolves the underlying tension, but a gradually assembled sequence of small steps can widen the space in which cooperation becomes possible.

2.3. The limits of CBMs: the lesson of the Indus Waters Treaty

A framework must also account for the limits of its central instrument. The 2025 crisis surrounding the Indus Waters Treaty offers a cautionary case. The treaty was concluded in 1960 with World Bank mediation and functioned for sixty-five years across three wars and repeated crises. It was supported by mechanisms that were CBM-like in form: regular hydrological data exchange, the Permanent Indus Commission, and a graduated dispute-resolution procedure. In April 2025, however, India suspended its participation following a terrorist attack in Pahalgam, halting data exchange and conducting reservoir operations without coordination (Al Jazeera, 2025; CSIS, 2025; Clingendael Institute, 2025).

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Two conclusions follow. The first is negative: formalisation does not guarantee durability, and a mechanism can be emptied of practical content within days if the political will to observe it disappears. The second is constructive: the vulnerability of the Indus arrangement lay partly in its concentration. Cooperation ran through a single institutional channel, so the suspension of that channel suspended cooperation as such. This suggests that redundancy across tracks is not a luxury but a design requirement.

2.4. The gap in the literature

Existing scholarship on transboundary water cooperation acknowledges the importance of trust, and the water diplomacy literature frequently uses the vocabulary of confidence building. What is missing is a systematic transfer. The CBM tradition has developed detailed typologies, assessment practices and a body of comparative experience, almost none of which has been imported into water governance research in structured form. Conversely, security scholars rarely treat rivers as a domain in which their instruments could apply. The result is a conceptual gap: practitioners in contested basins speak of building confidence without an analytical vocabulary for describing what has been built, what is missing, and how resilient the resulting arrangement is. This article addresses that gap.

3. Structural Kinship: Four Propositions

Despite their separate genealogies, water diplomacy and CBM theory can be shown to share a common structure. This section states that kinship as four propositions.

3.1. Shared diagnosis

Both traditions locate the source of conflict in uncertainty rather than in scarcity as such. The WDF places uncertainty at the centre of its account of complex water networks, treating the interaction of natural, societal and political subsystems as inherently unpredictable (Islam & Susskind, 2015). CBM theory defines its instruments by their function of reducing misunderstanding, tension and the potential for conflict (OSCE, 2011). In both cases, the recommended response is procedural and incremental rather than a one-off distributive settlement.

3.2. Typological transferability

The classical three-part typology transfers to water contexts with minimal modification, as set out in Table 1. Information measures correspond to hydrological data exchange and the disclosure of infrastructure parameters. Verification measures correspond to joint monitoring of intake facilities and to independent engineering review. Constraint measures correspond to agreed withdrawal limits, environmental flow commitments and seasonal coordination.

Table 1. Transfer of the classical CBM typology to the transboundary water context

Classical category (arms control)	**Core function**	**Equivalent in transboundary water governance**
Information measures	Reduce uncertainty about capabilities and intentions	Exchange of hydrological and meteorological data; disclosure of design parameters and planned withdrawal volumes; joint forecasting
Verification measures	Allow independent	Joint monitoring of intake and

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Classical category (arms control)	Core function	Equivalent in transboundary water governance
	confirmation of declared behaviour	hydraulic structures; observer missions; independent engineering review; satellite remote sensing
Constraint measures	Limit actions that would otherwise permit surprise or irreversible change	Agreed withdrawal ceilings; minimum environmental flow commitments; seasonal schedules; advance notification of commissioning

Source: author's elaboration on the basis of UNIDIR (1985) and OSCE (2011).

3.3. Multi-level architecture

Both traditions assume that engagement operates on several levels at once. Cold War experience shows that substantive dialogue between the blocs was built first through informal, expert and military-technical channels, and only later consolidated into official mechanisms (Capie & Evans, 2007). Water diplomacy follows the same sequence in reverse order of visibility: Track 1.5 and Track 2 formats can sustain meaningful contact precisely where official diplomacy is unavailable, and can prepare the technical content that official channels later adopt.

3.4. Mutual reinforcement

The two frameworks complete each other. CBMs create the preconditions for more ambitious water diplomacy, since allocation negotiations cannot begin without a baseline of shared and credible information. Conversely, the water-diplomatic emphasis on jointly produced knowledge and mutual gain supplies substantive content to CBMs and prevents them from becoming ritual. Where one dimension is absent, the other is incomplete. CBMs without a water-diplomatic frame remain technical protocols with no negotiating substance; water diplomacy without CBMs remains aspiration with no operational mechanism.

4. The Adapted Three-Dimensional Model

Building on the propositions above, this section sets out a three-dimensional model for the analysis of CBMs in transboundary water contexts, together with the criteria by which each dimension is assessed.

4.1. Dimension 1: Informational CBMs

Informational measures reduce uncertainty about what is happening in the basin. They include the regular exchange of hydrological and meteorological data; joint flood and drought forecasting; publication of information on planned infrastructure and its technical parameters; and voluntary disclosure through neutral platforms where direct bilateral disclosure is politically difficult. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe treats timely and reliable data exchange as a foundation of effective transboundary cooperation and has documented practice across a range of basins (UNECE, 2023, 2024). Informational measures are typically the least politically sensitive, which makes them the natural entry point in a sequence.

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4.2. Dimension 2: Verificational CBMs

Verificational measures allow declared behaviour to be checked independently. They include joint monitoring of intake and hydraulic facilities; joint field missions and observer presence; independent engineering review of major infrastructure; and satellite remote sensing. Remote sensing deserves particular attention in this model. It is politically neutral in the sense that it requires no physical access to sensitive territory and no formal consent, and it therefore functions where inspection regimes cannot be negotiated. It is, however, an imperfect substitute: it can establish what has been built and how much water is impounded, but it cannot establish intention, and it produces information about a party rather than with a party, which limits its confidence-building value.

4.3. Dimension 3: Restraining CBMs

Restraining measures limit unilateral action. They include agreed quantitative limits on withdrawal; commitments to minimum environmental flow releases; voluntary restrictions on unilateral actions capable of substantially altering the water regime; coordination of seasonal withdrawal schedules; and advance notification of the commissioning of new infrastructure. Restraining measures are the most demanding of the three dimensions, since they constrain sovereign decisions over resources located on national territory. In the sequence proposed here they are therefore approached last, once informational and verificational measures have established a shared factual basis.

4.4. Assessment criteria

Each dimension is assessed against three criteria, set out in Table 2. The scoring is deliberately coarse. Its purpose is not to produce a precise measurement but to make comparison possible: between tracks within a basin, between basins, and within a single track over time.

Table 2. Assessment criteria and scoring rule

Criterion	Guiding question	Scoring
Uncertainty reduction	Does the measure produce verifiable information that is updated on a regular basis?	1 = systematic; 0.5 = partial or irregular; 0 = absent
Escalation prevention	Did the period covered by the measure pass without open conflict over water?	1 = systematic; 0.5 = partial or irregular; 0 = absent
Continuity	Did the measure operate without prolonged interruption?	1 = systematic; 0.5 = partial or irregular; 0 = absent

5. Illustrative Application: The Amu Darya Basin

The Amu Darya basin offers a demanding test for the model because it contains two engagement tracks with radically different institutional histories. The application presented here is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Its purpose is to demonstrate that the model discriminates: that it yields

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different results for situations that are, in fact, different, and that it identifies the specific gaps rather than issuing a general verdict of cooperation or non-cooperation.

5.1. The post-Soviet track

Among the five post-Soviet riparian states, the ICWC and IFAS have operated for more than three decades as an institutionalised CBM regime, even though they are not described in those terms. Withdrawal limits are agreed annually, which is an informational and a restraining function combined. Compliance is monitored through the basin water organisations, which is a verificational function. Withdrawal is in practice constrained by the agreed limits, which is a restraining function. Against the criteria in Table 2, the track scores well on uncertainty reduction and continuity, and well on escalation prevention in the sense that disputes have not escalated to open conflict. The composite score is 2.5 out of 3. The half-point deduction reflects an identifiable gap: the mandate of the ICWC was never extended to the review of notifications concerning new infrastructure, an extension attempted in 2008 and left unrealised.

5.2. The Afghan track

The picture in relations with Afghanistan is different in kind rather than in degree. There is no systematic exchange of information on the technical parameters of the Qosh Tepa Canal or on planned withdrawal volumes. There is no joint monitoring mechanism; the breach of the canal embankment in December 2023 was confirmed through satellite observation by independent research groups rather than through any bilateral or multilateral channel (Crosslin, 2025). There are no agreed or voluntary limits on Afghan withdrawal. The composite score is 0 out of 3. In the vocabulary of the model, this is not a weak regime but a pre-institutional situation.

This does not mean that nothing exists. Since 2024, a set of semi - official formats has emerged, including the Termez Dialogue, the Afghanistan - Central Asia Consultative Dialogue, an Afghanistan - Central Asia think tank forum, and Afghan participation in Tashkent International Water Week. In the procedural reading of CBM theory set out in Section 2.2, these formats represent an early stage of confidence formation. They have created regular channels of direct communication that did not exist three years ago, and they have generated declaratory goodwill, including recognition by Uzbekistan of Afghanistan's entitlement to a share of the basin's water and statements from Kabul about developing relations on a legal basis and in accordance with the legitimate rights of regional states (The Times of Central Asia, 2026). What they have not yet produced is a single verifiable, regularly updated item of information about the canal. This is exactly the distinction the model is designed to capture: dialogue is not yet a confidence-building measure until it generates something checkable.

Table 3. Comparative application of the model to two tracks in the Amu Darya basin

1. **Dimension**	2. **Post-Soviet track (ICWC / IFAS)**	3. **Afghanistan track**
4. Informational	5. Annual agreement of withdrawal limits; established data flows between basin organisations	6. No systematic disclosure of canal parameters or withdrawal volumes
7. Verificational	8. Monitoring through basin water organisations; no review of new infrastructure	9. No joint monitoring; independent satellite observation only

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1. **Dimension**	2. **Post-Soviet track (ICWC / IFAS)**	3. **Afghanistan track**
	notifications	
10. Restraining	11. Withdrawal limited in practice by agreed quotas	12. No agreed or voluntary limits
13. Composite score	14. 2.5 / 3	15. 0 / 3

5.3. What the comparison implies

Two implications follow. The first concerns sequence. Since the Afghan track scores zero on all three dimensions, the appropriate next step is not a comprehensive agreement but the least demanding informational measure that can be sustained. The model suggests that attempts to begin with restraining measures, such as negotiated withdrawal ceilings, are likely to fail because there is no shared factual basis on which such a negotiation could rest.

The second concerns architecture. The Indus case discussed in Section 2.3 shows the danger of concentrating cooperation in a single channel. For the Amu Darya, the strategic priority is therefore not to wait for a comprehensive treaty, which is politically unattainable in the medium term, but to build a deliberately redundant architecture that combines multilateral channels (ICWC and IFAS), bilateral channels on the model of existing riparian agreements, and informal expert channels at Tracks 1.5 and 2. Redundancy means that failure at one level does not collapse engagement as a whole.

6. Discussion: Scope Conditions, Objections and Limitations

6.1. Scope conditions

The framework does not claim universal applicability. It assumes three conditions. First, some channel of communication must exist, even an informal one, since CBMs presuppose the possibility of transmitting and receiving signals. Second, a technical community must exist on both sides, capable of producing and interpreting hydrological information. Third, an actor must be available to host a neutral platform, whether a regional organisation, an international body or a third state. Where all three are absent, the framework describes a situation but does not prescribe a path.

6.2. Objections

Three objections deserve direct treatment. The first is that CBMs may serve as a delaying tactic. A party engaged in construction can participate in dialogue while the facts on the ground change irreversibly, gaining reputational benefit without conceding anything. The model responds to this objection through its scoring rule: dialogue that produces no verifiable output scores zero, and the framework therefore does not credit engagement as such.

The second objection is that engagement risks legitimising unilateral action. By entering technical cooperation over a project undertaken without notification, downstream states may implicitly accept the project as a given. This objection has force and cannot be fully dissolved. The response available within the framework is one of sequencing and framing: informational and verificational measures do not require acceptance of the underlying legal position, and can be framed as measures that preserve rather than prejudice the positions of the parties.

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The third objection is that CBMs are epiphenomenal, and that where confidence exists, cooperation would occur anyway. The Indus case cuts both ways here. It shows that mechanisms did not prevent suspension in 2025, but it also shows that they sustained cooperation through three wars. The claim advanced in this article is deliberately modest: CBMs do not create political will, but they lower the cost of cooperation when will is present and they preserve channels when it is absent.

6.3. Limitations and falsifiability

The framework has clear limits. CBMs cannot resolve underlying conflicts of interest; they can only create conditions in which those interests are managed by predictable means. They depend on political will that may be withdrawn in crisis. They operate within, not above, the political constraints of their environment, and the absence of broad recognition of the government in Kabul limits the formalisation potential of any CBM architecture in the Amu Darya basin over the medium term.

The framework is nonetheless falsifiable in a specific sense. It predicts that basins which develop informational measures before restraining ones will sustain cooperation longer than those which attempt the reverse sequence, and that architectures concentrated in a single channel will prove less resilient to political shock than redundant ones. Both predictions can be tested against a wider sample of basins, and the Amu Darya case will itself supply evidence over the period to 2030.

7. Conclusion

This article has advanced three arguments. First, water diplomacy and CBM theory share a structural kinship that permits systematic integration rather than loose analogy. Second, the classical three-part CBM typology transfers to transboundary water contexts with minimal modification and, combined with explicit assessment criteria, yields an operational analytical tool. Third, the Amu Darya basin constitutes a demanding case for that tool, because it contains simultaneously a mature CBM regime among the post-Soviet riparian states and a pre-institutional situation in relations with Afghanistan.

The value of the framework is both analytical and practical. Analytically, it supplies a structured vocabulary for describing how complete and how resilient a given cooperation architecture is, and for distinguishing dialogue from confidence building. Practically, it suggests a phased strategy for basins where formal treaties are unavailable, beginning with the least sensitive measures and building redundancy across tracks. That strategy is relevant beyond Central Asia, including to the Nile basin in the context of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and to the Mekong, where the principal upstream state remains outside the basin commission.

Further research should proceed in two directions. The first is predictive: tracking whether the sequence proposed for the Amu Darya materialises, and whether the indicators associated with each dimension move as the model expects. The second is comparative: extending the analysis to additional asymmetric basins in order to refine the typology and test the generality of the sequencing claim.

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