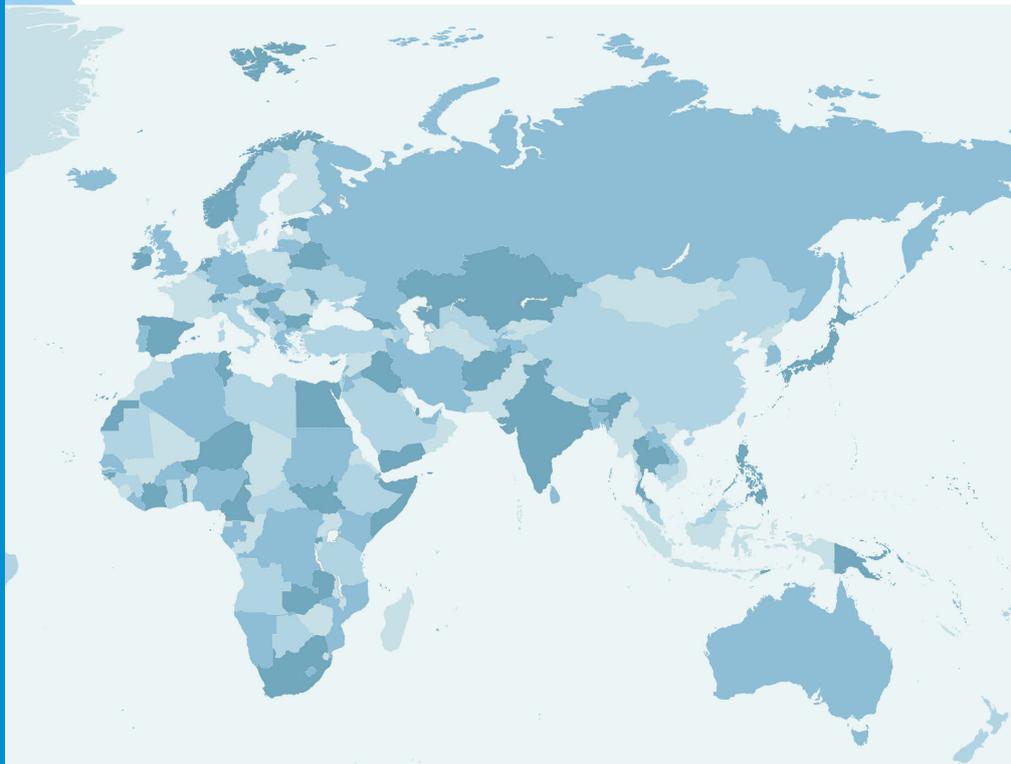


# LEFT, RIGHT AND CENTRE

Following is the first piece of our water research insight series, “Left, right and centre”. The new series will bring together a wide range of ontological and epistemological perspectives that explain the politics and governance in transboundary waters. The writing series is part of the “Research and Education” function of the Geneva Water Hub, University of Geneva.



n°1

## POWER-SENSITIVE MULTILATERALISM FOR WATER, PEACE AND SECURITY

by Dr. Sumit Vij, Senior Scientific Officer

### 1. Multilateralism and its role in water peace and security

After the Second World War, multilateralism emerged as a forward-thinking strategy for maintaining peace and security (Acharya, 1997). Apart from trade, political and security issues, multilateralism also found its feet in bringing states together to govern natural resources, including the transboundary watercourses and groundwater aquifers. In the current complex multipolar world order, multilateralism is needed more than ever to counter the existing and future water conflicts. Countries must engage in water dialogues and organise international water deliberations to showcase their innovations and deliberation processes on water diplomacy. Senegal is the first country in Sub-Saharan Africa to host the World Water Forum and

create an enabling environment to establish a legal and institutional framework for cooperation in the Senegal-Mauritanian Aquifer Basin. The successful multilateral initiative is between Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Senegal, the Organization for the Development of the Gambia River (OMVG), and the Organization for the Development of the Senegal River (OMVS).

Multilateralism has found ways in the transboundary watercourse interactions and is employed in two ways. First, to govern day-to-day water relations between the riparian states, where multiple actors come together to negotiate a beneficial proposition for their respective states. Examples of the past and ongoing negotiations on water sharing, infrastructure development, and data

exchange in the Nile, Senegal and Mekong basins have employed multilateralism. Second, multilateralism is used for incremental and transformative change for future governance of a transboundary watercourse (Cox, 1992; Knight, 2000). For instance, state and non-state actors consider stressors such as climate change and increasing demand for water in the allied sectors (food and energy) for river basin planning to reduce future water conflicts (Zawahri & Mitchell, 2011).

Even though multilateralism is considered a catalyst for cooperation, the evidence shows that bilateral negotiations are more common than multilateral transboundary water arrangements to accommodate individual hydrological needs and socio-political interests (Barua, Vij & Rahman, 2018; Salman & Uprety, 2002; Waterbury, 2002). Drivers such as high transaction costs involving multiple sovereign states for longer durations, balancing power asymmetry between states, and achieving individual interests push

for bilateralism (Barua, Vij and Rahman, 2018; Martin et al., 2011; Oye, 1985; Caporaso, 1992). Sovereign states tend to prefer bilateralism, against the advice of natural and social scientists for treating a river basin as a single socio-ecological unit. For instance, in the Ganges basin, India bilaterally negotiates with Bangladesh and Nepal, reducing the sharing of impairments for the dry season that can be made in a multilateral arrangement between the three riparians. Similarly, following its foreign policy principle of bilateralism, China exercises power asymmetry to meet its interests in transboundary resource sharing (Biba, 2018). However, for international river basins that lack cooperation, bilateralism is a positive and dogmatic starting point, possibly converting bilateral to multilateral cooperation frameworks (Mohamed, 2003). For instance, Botswana and South Africa reached bilateral agreements for the Upper Limpopo Basin before signing a multilateral accord and establishing the Limpopo River Commission.

## 2. The missing link: power-sensitive multilateralism to ensure future water security

Existing water diplomacy and research initiatives can over-optimistically frame multilateralism to resolve water conflicts, excluding the power interplay scenarios between the riparian states. The initiatives are heavily data-driven, emphasizing forecasting of water conflicts and tend to follow a power-blind approach, leading to frozen water conflicts and destructive cooperation situations (Zeitoun et al., 2020). Avoiding power interplay may tip the states towards the status quo trap and inaction (Vij et al., 2020). Multilateralism for the future of water security and peace needs to indulge actors in discussing power interplay games at different levels and scales of governance. Moreover, multilateralism needs to build a safe space that allows deliberation of sensitive issues, including water infrastructure (hydropower), water sharing, and joint research, instead of low hanging fruits such as navigation and data exchange.

Such multilateral processes and considerations might be extremely conflictual (constructive conflict) but will

eventually help transform antagonistic power interplay into positive cooperation. Such multilateral processes in transboundary water negotiations can help build trust and smoothen conflicts; taking a power-sensitive approach and not shying from constructive conflicts will be a game-changer for future governance.

Two strategies are proposed to make multilateralism power-sensitive in transboundary waters.

- Multilateralism in transboundary waters can be realized on a multi-track and multi-scale negotiation framework. Such a framework will facilitate an understanding of power interplay between various actors at multiple levels and scales, elaborating on issues outside the water box that influence and politicize a transboundary river basin. Further, the multi-scalar analysis (geographical, sectoral, and institutional) will enhance the nuanced understanding of issues related to a river basin domestically and regionally involving both authoritative and democratic regimes (Cash et al.,

2006). The multi-scalar analysis will also assist in explaining nuances linked to future stressors such as climate change and the water-food-energy nexus (Kimmich et al., 2019). For instance, the two-level analysis in the Brahmaputra Basin has been able to identify underlying reasons for the status-quo between India and Bangladesh, especially with the extensive flooding due to increased river flows and extended droughts as a result of changes in monsoon rainfall (Vij et al., 2020).

- The establishment of multi-track dialogue platforms to generate various institutional arrangement options by multilateral agencies such as International Governmental Organizations (IGOs) and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs). Riparian states that are members of multilateral agencies can benefit from large knowledge networks, secure access to information, and reduce transaction costs for policy research. Moreover, IGOs and INGOs can contribute and assist

in negotiating agreeable agendas and establishing conflict resolution mechanisms (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). For instance, the World Bank successfully negotiated the Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan, which is still operational after three militarized wars (Iyer, 2003). Similarly, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Water Convention has promoted river basin planning in different regions and supported dialogue platforms for states and non-state actors to meet and exchange lessons learned concerning transboundary water management. It is pertinent for multilateral agencies to invest in multi-track dialogues to build trust and develop parallel efforts. In instances where track 1 dialogue fails, the actors at other tracks continue to deliberate. The door for negotiations must always be open, as unknown opportunities might emerge to transform conflicts into cooperation.

### 3. International Geneva and Geneva Water Hub promote multilateralism

Water research and policy initiative such as the Geneva Water Hub has a vital role in establishing a power-sensitive multilateralism. Considering the world political cycle, where multipolar global order is emerging, the Geneva Water Hub positions itself to establish a multi-track and multi-scalar framework. The Geneva Water Hub, with its resources and water security agenda, can manifest an “institution of multilateralism” within riparian states involved in water conflicts (Caporaso, 1992). Moreover, the Geneva Water Hub can also appeal to less formal, less codified practices, ideas and norms to instil cooperation among riparians, promoting track two and track three levels of water diplomacy.

As a “city of peace”, Geneva and the International Geneva are critical to further promoting and supporting the development of multilateral dynamics. International Geneva also brings together key water actors such as

the World Meteorological Organization and UN-Water and the UNECE Water Convention Secretariat’s strategic efforts. International Geneva can provide a safe space for multilateral transboundary water negotiation processes and offers an extensive network of actors that can potentially contribute to various power-sensitive topics linked to water sharing, infrastructure development (dams) and data exchange. Moreover, such use of a safe space aligns with the essence of Geneva City and all its institutions that promote respect for multilateralism and transform water conflicts into cooperation. With the global restriction imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, International Geneva is uniquely positioned to establish and continue transboundary negotiations via virtual platforms, with the established trust that has been built through past face-to-face meetings in Geneva.

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**Note:** Members of the Geneva Water Hub shared their knowledge and experiences throughout the World Water Forum 2022 at the Swiss Booth between 21-25 March 2022, touching upon issues relating to legal frameworks on water infrastructure (dams), the Blue Peace initiative and water security.



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