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Water diplomacy paths – An approach to recognise water diplomacy actions in shared waters

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Description / Abstract

Water diplomacy is gaining increasing attention among both researchers and policy-makers. The interest is understandable, given that the concept brings together themes such as shifting geopolitics, new types of diplomacy and increasing water scarcity. Yet, there is no common definition for water diplomacy and actual water diplomacy actions typically vary across multiple tracks and scales.

In this article, we seek to contribute to the practice of water diplomacy by introducing a step-wise Water Diplomacy Paths approach for analysing different water diplomacy contexts and related water diplomacy actions. To facilitate this, we recognise five key aspects for water diplomacy (Political; Preventive; Integrative; Cooperative; Technical) and propose a general definition for water diplomacy. We also discuss the possible distinctions between the related concepts of water diplomacy and transboundary water cooperation. The use of the Water Diplomacy Paths approach is demonstrated with brief case studies focusing on Central Asia, the Mekong Region, and the Finnish-Russian water cooperation. The work builds on an extensive literature review and comparative analysis of water diplomacy approaches as well as on a series of workshops and interviews among selected water diplomacy actors, including career diplomats.

The suggested Water Diplomacy Paths approach envisions possible ways forward through four main steps: 1) identification of key themes and related actors; 2) analysis of the current state, 3) recognition of (undesired) drivers and related scenarios; and 4) identification of possible water diplomacy actions. We see that the approach has potential to support water diplomacy processes with the help of the distinction it makes between water- and diplomacy-focused activities as well as its consideration of tensions and related actions. Such characteristics also emphasise the complementarity that water diplomacy actions have with more traditional transboundary water cooperation arrangements. We argue that water diplomacy as a concept and as a practical approach provides an example of the future of foreign policy and diplomacy, where the use of shared waters is likely to be of increasing importance.

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