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Review Article

A comparative analysis of water diplomacy: The European Union, People's Republic of China and the United States

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Abstract: Water has recently evolved from a sectoral development issue into a strategic variable of contemporary foreign policy. The article compares how the European Union, the People's Republic of China, and the United States have gradually adapted to this change and their current status in water diplomacy. The analysis, focusing on three analytical dimensions (goals, resources and instruments) argues that while the centrality of water represents a continuity into their external action, they do so through distinct strategic logics. The European Union advances a normative-first model grounded in delegation and orchestration. China pursues infrastructure-based interdependence through state-directed finance under the Belt and Road Initiative, combining developmental discourse with geopolitical leverage. The United States has historically relied on institutional reach and interagency coordination, integrating water security into broader strategies of stability and conflict prevention, although recent institutional discontinuity has altered this configuration. The common trend that emerges is that water has moved from the margins of development policy to the core of geopolitical calculation. The comparative analysis demonstrates that water diplomacy reflects broader foreign policy traditions rather than isolated sectoral engagement, offering a new lens through which to observe contemporary power projection.

Keywords: *Water diplomacy; foreign policy analysis; European Union; People's Republic of China; United States; Belt and Road Initiative; global water governance; soft power*.

1. Introduction

Water has long been treated as a development concern, a technical matter that needs to be addressed through aid, infrastructure, and sectoral cooperation. Over the past two decades, measurable improvements have been achieved in global water and sanitation coverage (WASH), particularly driven by the United Nations and its Millennium Development Goals, and, more recently, Sustainable Development Goal 6. The percentage of the population with access to basic drinking water increased from 75.7 to 89.1% and for sanitation from 54.8 to 76.9% from 2000 to 2020. Nevertheless, hundreds of millions still lack even basic drinking water services, and progress

remains uneven across regions, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia. This gap can be better understood as a result of increased vulnerability to hydrological and climate shocks, inadequate infrastructure quality, weak governance systems, and limited financial resources. [1] In this challenging context, climate change intensifies hydrological volatility through rising temperatures that cause glacier retreat and erratic rainfall that place water systems under structural stress. As climate variability intensifies and demand increases, water is no longer confined to the development dimension. In regions where basins cross borders, the access and control of water flows deeply intersect questions of sovereignty, stability and power. The scale of the issue is considerable, as the UN identified 286 transboundary river and lake basins worldwide in 2021. [2]

The mismanagement of water, caused by a lack of coordination or conflicting visions of sovereignty, has long been a source of tension that seldom escalates into confrontation. As the Pacific Institute documents, incidents where water plays a critical role are increasing under conditions of climate stress. The 2025 update to the Water Conflict Chronology reports 420 water-related conflicts in 2024 alone, following consecutive surges of 70% in 2022 and 50% in 2023, mainly driven by conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine and the deliberate targeting of water infrastructure as a means of war. Under such conditions of intensifying climate stress and geopolitical tensions, institutionalised management of shared waters is no longer a technical concern but rather embedded in core foreign policy calculations. [3] Against this complex context, the focus of international actors in recent years has consistently centred on water diplomacy. As defined by Sehring et al, it "*refers to the deliberative political processes and practices of preventing, mitigating, and resolving disputes over transboundary water resources and developing joint water governance arrangements by applying foreign policy means which are embedded in bi- and/or multilateral relations beyond the water sector and taking place at different tracks and levels*." [4]

Water diplomacy, despite its recent emergence as a distinct field of analysis, remains unevenly investigated. Existing research has primarily focused on country or region-specific issues and often treats water as an isolated issue rather than a part of a broader foreign policy. This gap is particularly evident when considering the foreign policies of three major actors: the European Union (EU), the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the United States of America (US). The three great powers have pursued strategic expansion in their international engagement in water diplomacy over the past two decades, yet, as the article will show, the paths they have taken reflect their diverse approaches, as well as differences in institutional structures, policy traditions, and geopolitical priorities.

Against these premises, the central research question becomes: how do major international actors integrate water into their external actions, and to what extent does water diplomacy reflect broader foreign-policy logics rather than isolated sectoral engagement?

This article addresses the literature gap by analysing the EU, the PRC, and the US as three distinct models of water diplomacy. It argues that their engagement reflects differentiated strategic logics embedded in their respective traditions. At the same time, a common trend emerges across all three actors: water appears to have gained the status of a strategic variable within external action. This dynamic provides the basis for a comparative analysis of how contemporary powers employ water in their foreign policy.

2. Methodology

This article adopts the methodology proposed by Morin and Paquin, who identify five dimensions through which foreign policy can be examined: goals, mobilised resources, instruments, decision-making processes, and outcomes. [5] Given the comparative scope of the article and its focus on the external projection of influence through water diplomacy, the analysis concentrates on goals, resources, and instruments. These dimensions allow for a systematic comparison of how water is used as a foreign policy tool across the EU, China, and the United States, while remaining compatible with the article's intention. The decision-making process, while essential for understanding the domestic genesis of foreign policy, is not analysed in detail in order to avoid asymmetries from differences in the general political systems, and especially institutional transparency and access to sources. Outcomes are addressed only briefly, with the aim of assessing effectiveness without extending the analysis beyond the article's primary explanatory focus.

The analysis of **goals** treats foreign policy objectives as the result of a combination of stated objectives and empirical results. Accordingly, this article combines *communicated goals* and *deduced goals*. Communicated goals are identified through the analysis of primary sources such as official strategies, policy documents, and public statements on water-related international engagement, and are used to describe how the EU, China, and the United States frame water diplomacy. The analysis follows by deducing the goals pursued from observable behaviour, such as the consistency of water diplomacy practices over time, the contexts in which engagement is intensified, and the strategic environments in which water-related initiatives are deployed. This approach allows the analysis to move beyond normative rhetoric and to identify the objectives practically shaping water diplomacy, while ensuring comparability across actors with different communicative styles.

The analysis of **mobilised resources** is framed as assets that can be converted into influence, depending on how they are mobilised and exploited. In particular, attention is paid to which resources are prioritised, how they are deployed, and the degree of continuity in their use over time. This approach will allow for the description of the *power paradox*, as identified by the authors, where the possession of raw resources does not automatically translate into influence, and to assess how the studied different actors transform available resources into foreign policy action.

Instruments of foreign policy are the observable means through which political authorities conduct foreign policy. The focus on instruments reflects the realities of decision-making, as leaders are often required to react rapidly to international events and therefore select from a limited choice of interventions. Foreign policy instruments can be situated along a continuum ranging from diplomacy to military force, or, in the words of Joseph Nye, from soft power to hard power. [6] Between these two extremes, instruments are grouped into three main categories: socialisation, which targets the formation of ideas; coercion, which targets the modification of interests; and intervention, which targets the domestic political structures of a foreign state.

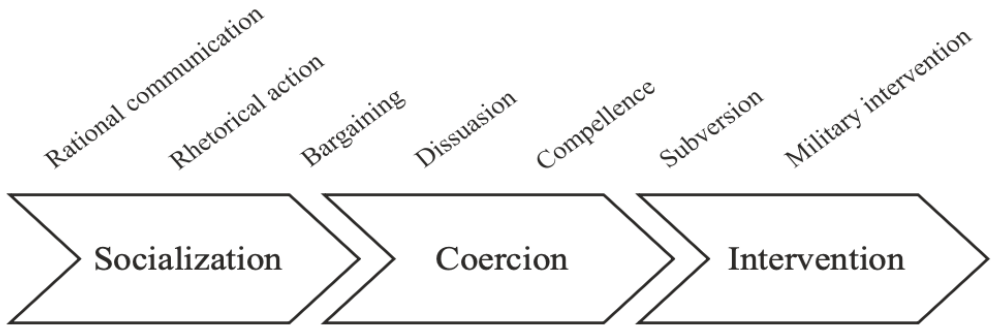

Figure 1. Foreign policy instruments - Morin, Jean-Frédéric, and Paquin, Jonathan. 2018.

This framework is adopted because it provides a structured way to study the growing role of water in foreign policy and to compare how different actors integrate it into their external projection. Examining the goals pursued, the resources mobilised, and the instruments deployed helps to assess how water is used as a strategic asset. The framework's flexibility makes it particularly suitable for analysing actors as diverse as the European Union, China, and the United States, whose approaches to water diplomacy vary in scope, institutional structure, and geopolitical motivation. Ultimately, the method enables a comparative interpretation of water diplomacy as a reflection of broader foreign-policy logics, *normative*, *infrastructural*, or *securitarian*, rather than as a series of isolated policy choices.

3. The European Union (EU)

The EU, as one of the world's leading development actors, contributes to shaping international agendas on poverty reduction, sustainable development and human rights. Within this framework, water has firstly emerged as a sectoral development concern, linked to public health and poverty alleviation. Over the past decade, however, the scope of water diplomacy has systematically expanded, adapting to the changing environment to include growing tensions and stress over climate change, demographic pressure, and shared water resources, ultimately increasing its strategic dimension. As a result, key policy documents of the EU have gradually adapted in order to frame water as a factor of peace and stability. The Council, as the institution that decides political direction of the Union, explicitly calls for strengthening its leadership in multilateral fora and for embedding water considerations into its newly established geopolitical instruments, including the Green Deal, the Global Gateway, and Team Europe.

Communicated goals

In the last decade, the EU has changed the role of water from a development concern to a strategic pillar of its external action. This is clearly shown by examining how Union's major policy documents on water topics have shifted the rhetoric. The 2013 Council Conclusions [7] - the EU's first explicit political mandate on water diplomacy - remained centred on a development frame, with water portrayed as a factor in peace, stability, and sustainable growth. At this stage, the priority was to integrate water considerations into existing foreign and security

policy instruments. On the other hand, the 2021 Council Conclusions [8] represented a pivot by framing water as a strategic issue that cuts across traditional development, climate, and humanitarian action, while introducing the element of peace and stability into the equation. In this regard, the Council reaffirms EU diplomatic engagement on water, especially transboundary water cooperation, and calls for stronger synergies between climate and energy diplomacy, as well as biodiversity and food and nutrition security. A second cluster of communicated goals is based on the importance of protecting and promoting social rights. The 2021 document recalls the EU's guidelines on safe drinking, water and sanitation and emphasises "leave no one behind," with attention to children, persons with disabilities and gender equality and the importance of such practices for epidemic preparedness. They also highlight SDG 6 as "severely off-track and under-financed" and call for enhancing the water dimension of EU external action and UN agendas, while strengthening multilateral coordination through UN-Water and supporting the creation of a UN special envoy for water.

Deduced goals

The EU consistently pursues the institutionalisation of cooperative, rules-based transboundary water governance. This is visible in the reiterated promotion of international water cooperation agreements in the two examined Council conclusions. [7][8] It is further reflected in sustained EU efforts to promote accession and implementation of key conventions such as UNECE/WHO Protocol on Water and Health, the UN Convention on Combating Desertification and others. A key feature that emerges from these documents is the continuity between the Union's evolving water diplomacy and its broader identity as a normative power, as first conceptualised by Ian Manners in 2002. [9] The EU frames water governance as an arena to promote rules, standards, and principles, ranging from human rights to sustainability. This framing is consistent with the long-standing pattern in which the Union seeks to shape international relations through the diffusion of norms rather than through coercive instruments. In water diplomacy, this translates into placing structured institutions and rights-based management at the centre of its external action, making it a natural extension of the EU's normative foreign policy model. Beyond its normative dimension, some authors have explicitly interpreted EU water diplomacy as a strategy aimed at strengthening the Union's soft power. In particular, Álvarez Arcá argues that the EU uses its water diplomacy as a strategic tool to influence global international governance. In this sense, the EU relies on its regulatory experience and financial capabilities to encourage third states to align with the EU's own water governance model and its norms and standards. [10]

Resources

Resources mobilised for Water-related purposes in the European Union have transformed over the past two decades now including investment platforms, basin governance mechanisms, and multi-level diplomatic instruments. Nevertheless, the foundation of the EU's external water engagement was the ACP–EU Water Facility in 2004, financed through the European Development Fund and established mainly to provide access to drinking water and improve the sanitation capacities. The facility had a budget of approximately 700 million euro and more

than 300 projects across Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, representing the Union's main water-related instrument during this period. [11] The period between 2014 and 2020 can be described as the bridge between WASH-focused cooperation and today's strategic water diplomacy. Newly developed instruments such as the EU Water Initiative (EUWI), the Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF), and the EU's regional cooperation framework (Africa, Central Asia, and the Mediterranean) were the first to link water resources with conflict prevention, transboundary basin management, and regional stability. [12] During this period, water-related commitments doubled to an estimated 1.4–1.6 billion euros, with the European Investment Bank (EIB) becoming a key co-financer of large-scale water projects.

The third and current phase represents the full integration of water resources into the EU's foreign-policy architecture. Global Europe, with its Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, has a budget of 79.5 billion euros, of which approximately 2.4 billion euros is allocated to water-related programs. Team Europe, as the backbone of Global Europe, coordinates 51 ongoing projects with an estimated budget exceeding 500 million euros on Transboundary Water Management in Africa. The EIB amplifies this reach further, financing around 3 billion euros per year in water operations, including in critical basins such as the Niger, Nile, and Mekong, to serve foreign-policy objectives such as advancing stability, climate adaptation, resilience, and multilateral cooperation while strengthening the EU's external visibility. [13] However, the possession of extensive financial and institutional resources does not always translate into effective influence. Power resources become politically meaningful only when converted into meaningful instruments. For the EU's water diplomacy, this conversion is not uniform across different regions. An interesting point of view is the constraint that concerns Member States of the EU and their historical legacy, particularly in the African continent. Staeger, in its decolonial Pan-African critique, argues that the EU's normative power is often experienced as a continuation of a neo-Kantian Eurocentric discourse depicted as universally desirable, de facto hampering a trustful partnership and marginalising endemic traditions and undermining African agency. In this regard, a further element to consider is the emergence of other actors promoting a different approach to development. [14] In particular, China, as a development actor, has proven to be effective, as the article will describe in the following chapter, mainly due to its framing of an unconditional alternative to the Western "impositions", including the EU. Together, these dynamics highlight the need for governance arrangements that can mediate asymmetries and enhance local ownership. The following section on EU instruments will present the Union's latest response to this specific need: the tools of delegation and orchestration.

Instruments

The effectiveness of EU water diplomacy relies on the instruments through which the resources are deployed. In response to the limits identified above, the Union has increasingly relied on instruments of indirect governance that seek to operate through cooperation rather than imposition. In this context, delegation and orchestration emerge as mechanisms through which the EU seeks to improve its external agency while addressing the perception of marginalisation previously described. [15]

Delegation, rooted in the principal-agent theory, is the act by which the principal (the EU) delegates a governance task to a different agent (the recipient country). The role of the principal is that of controlling ex ante and ex post the delegated actions to ensure the accomplishment of the objective. In practice, the EU externalises implementation to actors capable of achieving technical, diplomatic, or political outcomes that the Union itself cannot deliver alone, because it either lacks coercive power or has been confronted with contextual resistance. Therefore, this instrument allows the EU to channel its water objectives through intermediary bodies, perceived as closer, such as river basin organisations (e.g., OMVS, Niger Basin Authority) and UN agencies (UNEP, UNESCO-IHP).

Orchestration, on the other hand, is the natural complement of the model. Rather than delegating the implementation of the policy, the EU orchestrates the mobilisation of voluntary actors such as Member States, development banks, NGOs, and private actors. The action takes place under coordinated frameworks such as the Team Europe Initiatives and the Global Gateway. Through orchestration the EU acts as an aligner of diverse actors, providing the institutional structure where they can join efforts in order to achieve a better result when compared to the separate action of each. This governance-based resource structure is one of the EU's distinctive advantages in water diplomacy. It allows Brussels to project influence far beyond the scale of its own institutions, relying instead on a distributed network of partners aligned with EU priorities.

Delegation and orchestration are a clear representation of how the EU has adapted its development strategy to both accommodate its early critics and to foster the institutionalisation that provides a structured approach.

This analysis indicates that the EU's water diplomacy is the result of a normative-first approach, the mobilisation of substantial resources and the increasing reliance on indirect governance instruments. The Union has gradually circled around water diplomacy, starting from a sectoral development concern to the strategic components that represent today. The approach that the Union has developed can be summarised as grounded in multilateralism, based on shared rules and the promotion of institutionalized governance. Its effectiveness depends on structural constraints, including historical legacies, perceptions of imposition, and increasing competition from alternative models. The EU has responded by adapting its external agency to address these constraints better, thereby de facto enhancing partner ownership.

The analysis of the EU provides a useful benchmark for comparison. In the following sections, both China and the US will be scrutinised to understand their singularities and how their models compare both in qualitative and quantitative terms.

4. People's Republic of China

The People's Republic of China's approach to development cooperation can be described as unique. Unlike traditional donors, China decides to frame its external cooperation primarily as mutually beneficial cooperation, not as foreign aid. This determination stems from China's historical experience as a recipient of development assistance, which has served as the basis for South-South cooperation (SSC). In this sense, a defining feature of

China's development policy is the continuous emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual benefit that allows Beijing to strategically frame itself as "the largest developing country in the world". [16]

The chapter proceeds in three steps. First, it reconstructs communicated goals from official discourse. Then, identifies deduced goals from recurrent patterns in its overseas engagement. Finally, it assesses the resources and instruments through which China converts financial capital and material capacity into external influence.

Communicated goals

Analyzing China's development policy can be particularly challenging due to its singular political structure and approach in the international arena. To do so, this first section will rely on China's official documents, which depict what Xi Jinping's China wants to convey to other actors, thereby enabling an understanding of how it interprets its water diplomacy and, in particular, how its own assessment compares with the analysis of the outcomes.

The PRC has consistently employed White Papers to express its position on significant policy issues, including development. The latest and most comprehensive source is the White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era (WP), released in January 2021. [16] While the document presents the Mainland's grand strategy for international development cooperation under Xi Jinping (2012-...) as a New Era, the first few paragraphs already reveal an element of continuity with its legacy, mentioning as guiding principles: mutual benefit, political non-interference, and respect for national sovereignty. All these attributes could be traced back to Zhou Enlai's *Eight Principles of China's Economic and Technical Foreign Aid* (1964). [17]

Despite transitioning from a lower-middle-income economy in 2000 to the world's second-largest economy, China continues to stress its status as a developing country that relies primarily on mutual assistance between developing countries through SSC and triangular cooperation, positioning its external agency as solidarity, more like a partner rather than a patron. [18]

In this discourse, water diplomacy is presented as a pillar of China's development cooperation and infrastructure strategy. Large-scale projects such as dams and hydropower plants are often described in official discourse as the means by which China contributes to economic development, energy security, and poverty reduction. This approach has yielded substantial results: by 2022, Chinese companies had been involved in the construction of 49 dams in 18 BRI countries. [19] The WP documents 5 goals of its development strategy:

1. Enhancing policy coordination
2. Strengthening infrastructure connectivity
3. Promoting unimpeded trade
4. Deepening financial integration
5. Fostering closer people-to-people ties

Among these, infrastructure connectivity and people-to-people ties are directly linked to water diplomacy. Water infrastructure connectivity is primarily carried out under the Maritime Silk Road. The main focus of the

latter is the construction of a new, smooth, and efficient corridor to connect key ports and create new major links between coastal hubs.

China has also addressed water supply issues for vulnerable groups in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Djibouti, where it has built water supply systems to ensure safe drinking water.

Another chapter of China's WP, strictly related to water diplomacy, concerns its commitment to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As the primary goal of the Agenda is poverty reduction, the Mainland actively supports agricultural practices and the health care system by helping developing countries through measures such as the upgrading of irrigation systems and providing specialised training for technical personnel in water management to improve the population's agricultural techniques and provide long-lasting assistance.

Finally, another aspect of Chinese water diplomacy that has been at the centre of the analysis during the last decade of BRI is the relationship that Chinese investment has with climate change and its environmental impact in general. Since the launch in 2013, scholars analysing the New Silk Road have repeatedly raised concerns about the environmental footprint of Chinese practices. In response, China has strategically adjusted the centrality of its sustainability goals by introducing a green taxonomy in 2021 and announcing its commitment to end the construction of new coal-fired power plants abroad. However, this new Green Silk Road continues to be contested in its outcomes, as the latest research documents that while China proclaims its commitment to sustainable practices, in practice, many BRI projects still face environmental and social challenges. [20]

Deduced goals

Beyond official discourse, China's water diplomacy reveals some recurrent patterns in the context of the previous 13 years of BRI investments, allowing for a clearer understanding of its deduced objectives. These goals are inferred from the consistency of engagement over time, the preference for specific models of cooperation, and the strategic environments in which water-related initiatives are deployed.

A first deduced goal is the construction of long-term political alignment through infrastructure-based interdependence. Hydropower alone accounts for approximately 27% of China's cumulative overseas power capacity. These kinds of projects naturally have a long-term horizon, building financial, technical, and institutional ties with partner governments. In this regard, China's overseas dam projects tend to create a level of interdependence that provides Beijing with significant leverage. A clear example is the Lancang-Mekong River, where China has built 11 dams upstream, giving it effective control over water flows. While China presents this engagement as mutually beneficial for affected states (Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia), Vietnam and Cambodia have raised concerns about increased vulnerability, which threatens food security and water flow, both of which depend significantly on the Chinese will. In this sense, Beijing's development cooperation works as a strategic asset that helps improve its regional influence and hegemony. [21]

A second deduced goal, which provides a direct comparison with the normative power of the European Union, is to create development trajectories in partner countries without exporting governance norms. China's

foreign policy engagement tends to prioritise shaping economic and social outcomes through direct technical delivery rather than regulatory frameworks or institutional reform. This pattern aligns with the principles of sovereignty and non-interference emphasised in China's development cooperation doctrine.

A third deduced goal of China's water diplomacy concerns the management of reputational risk linked to large-scale infrastructure finance, particularly in response to allegations of "debt-trap diplomacy." Beijing, as highlighted in the latest White Paper, sought to reframe its external engagement by emphasising debt sustainability. Recent empirical evidence from China's lending practices supports this interpretation. In the case of Ecuador, where the debt towards China represented 11% of Ecuador's total external debt, Chinese banks have decided to renegotiate 4.4 billion USD in debt, alleviating 1.4 billion by extending maturities and adjusting interest rates. [22] [23] In this sense, the recently acquired attention to debt concerns helps to safeguard the partnerships, exposing how the narrative of "debt-trap diplomacy" oversimplifies the complexities of China's financial engagements with developing countries.

Resources

China's water diplomacy relies on a distinct configuration of financial, technical, and institutional resources, which are mobilised through large-scale infrastructure finance and material capabilities. The core material resource defining China's water diplomacy is its capacity to finance capital-intensive infrastructure. China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China play an integral role in supporting dams, hydropower facilities, irrigation systems, and water supply projects across countries along the Belt and Road Initiative, accounting for roughly 40% of all Chinese overseas hydropower capacity. [24] However, quantifying China's mobilised resources is difficult because there is no single, official dataset that reports financing transparently. Chinese policy banks publish only partial, non-standardised information. At the same time, the main international datasets used by researchers (World Bank, IMF, etc.) track debt stocks and macrofinancial data, but omit parts of Chinese official lending. Horn, Reinhart and Trebesch show this problem directly, finding that a large share of China's lending is not recorded in official debt statistics. [25]

While the complete picture of Chinese lending and investment practices is difficult to reconstruct, available estimates provide a clear sense of the scale. In this sense, cumulative Chinese engagement under BRI since its establishment in 2013 has already exceeded 1 trillion USD, divided in 634 billion in construction contracts and 419 billion in non-financial investments. [26] Within this category, hydropower constitutes a significant part of China's overseas portfolio, accounting for approximately 27% of China's cumulative operational overseas power capacity.

Since 2021, however, two significant changes have shaped BRI's external investments. First, the decision to stop financing new overseas coal-fired power plants has sparked the green reorientation of China's energy engagement, embracing the so-called Green Silk Road. Recent data show a clear shift in the composition of China's overseas power financing, with solar and wind projects now representing a substantial share of newly

financed capacity. China can maintain a dominant position in the sector thanks to its vast reserves of rare earths and technical know-how across both solar and wind. [24] Second, this green shift has been accompanied by the decision to move toward smaller-scale projects, the so-called "small is beautiful", which has emerged in response to the accusations about the debt burdens of the massive projects overseas. [27] The new financed hydropower capacity during the same years amounts to only 1%, indicating a retreat from capital-intensive dam projects in favour of lower-risk investments. Yet, hydropower remains prominent in the medium-term outlook, constituting 38% of capacity in the project pipeline. This reorientation illustrates the power paradox of Beijing. Rather than a reduction of ambition, it reflects an effort to improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of China's resource mobilisation, de facto demonstrating that China's evolving water diplomacy depends not only on the volume of resources mobilised, but on the capacity to deploy them in forms that are politically sustainable.

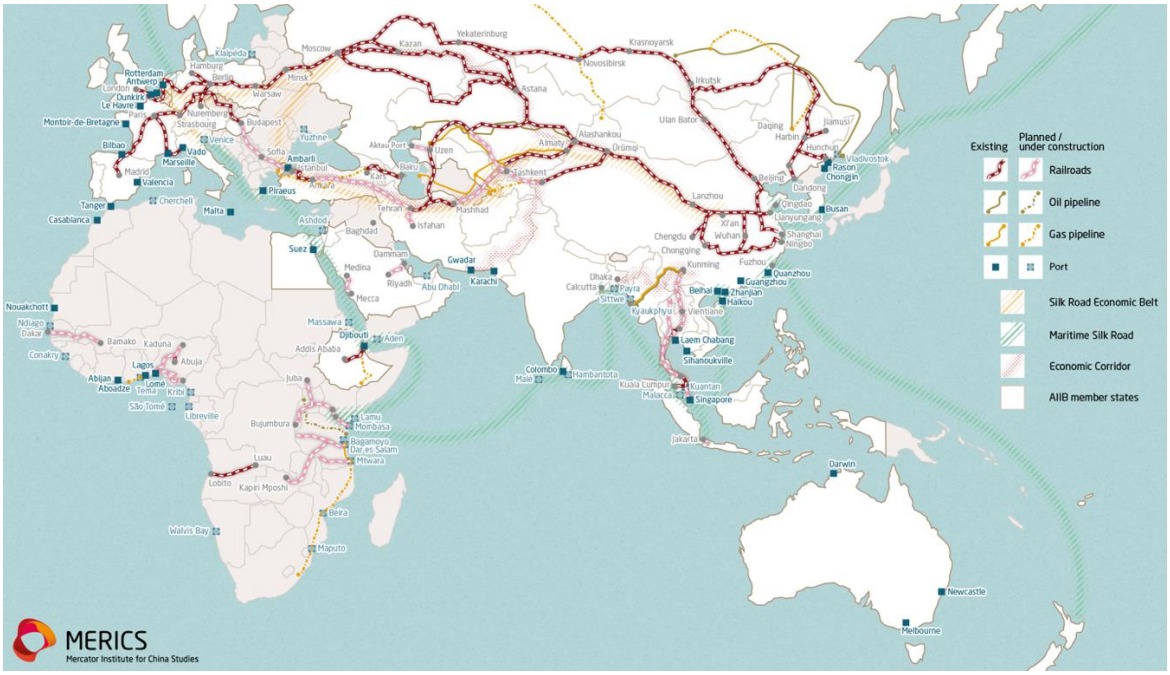

Figure 2. Map of the Belt and Road Initiative across Eurasia, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific, including the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road and associated port and logistics corridors.

Instruments

As the previous paragraphs have shown, China's external action on water is mainly deployed through its broader development cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. In this context, it is important to consider China's foreign policy in its own terms. Beijing benefits from a planning horizon and policy coordination capacity that is hard to replicate in many other electoral systems. The continuous utilisation of Five-Year Plans, coupled with long-term targets (e.g., Rejuvenation 2049), explains how China can maintain priorities over time, creating the conditions for the success of programs such as the BRI. [28] By contrast, political economists have long

highlighted that shorter electoral cycles, typical in democracies, can create time constraints, making it more difficult to commit to external policies, particularly in infrastructure sectors, where the timeframe is naturally longer. [29] This strategic advantage translates into an effective combination of foreign policy tools.

Lastly, coming back to Morin and Paquin's framework of study, China's water diplomacy relies primarily on socialization and coercion and avoids direct intervention in domestic political structures. Socialization appears to operate through the framing of hydro-strategy as a mutually beneficial development policy, thus encouraging partner states to align with Chinese methodology. Coercion, on the other hand, is often practiced through a combination of economic and political pressure. State-directed finance, easy access to large amounts of capital, tends to shape partner states' cost-benefit calculations. This coercive dimension is reinforced by the fact that BRI-related cooperation is directly linked to diplomatic non-recognition of Taiwan, as illustrated by recent cases in Honduras and Nauru. [30] [31]

5. United States of America

The United States has been a central actor in global development and humanitarian assistance, with a long-standing engagement in water featured as a sectoral development concern, closely linked to public health, poverty reduction, and service delivery, and later consolidated through regulatory commitments such as the Water for the Poor Act (2005) and the Water for the World Act (2014). [32] [33] Over the past decade, however, U.S. water diplomacy has progressively incorporated a stronger strategic rationale that has amplified the foreign-policy implications of water insecurity. The U.S. approach relies on institutional reach, technical expertise, and interagency coordination, with USAID as the main implementing platform supported by a wide range of diplomatic and specialized agencies. At the same time, the resilience of this model has been recently constrained by domestic political discontinuity.

Communicated goals

In 2022, the Biden-Harris administration presented its U.S. Global Water Strategy 2022–2027. [34] The document outlines the United States' government's vision for a water-secure world capable of overcoming challenges such as global pandemic shocks and climate change. The Strategy explicitly frames water within U.S. foreign policy by linking it to broader challenges such as development and security. The U.S. identifies four strategic objectives, which serve as the guide to U.S. water diplomacy for 2022–2027:

1. Strengthen water and sanitation sector governance, financing, institutions, and markets;
2. Increase equitable access to safe, sustainable, and climate-resilient drinking water and sanitation services, and adoption of key hygiene behaviours;
3. Improve climate-resilient conservation and management of freshwater resources and associated ecosystems; and
4. Anticipate and reduce conflict and fragility related to water.

These objectives are intended to be pursued through a multilateral approach that involves all of the U.S. government's available tools and the mobilization of every other actor capable of contributing to the matter with diplomatic engagement, such as multilateral institutions. The Strategy repeatedly emphasises that progress in the water sector contributes not only to public health and economic outcomes, but also to governance capacity and social stability, thus implying the securitarian interests. In that sense, the explicit inclusion of conflict and fragility prevention as a standalone strategic objective represents a clear evolution compared to earlier U.S. hydro strategies. In this regard, conflicts sparked by water issues are framed as a foreign policy priority because they can often intensify instability and geopolitical tensions, particularly in contexts characterised by climate stress, demographic pressures, and weak institutional capacity [34][35].

The U.S., while framing the Strategy as global in scope, identifies a sub-group of High Priority Countries (HPCs). These are selected based on a methodology that combines quantitative indicators, such as water and sanitation needs, with qualitative considerations, including political context, institutional capacity, and the presence of U.S. diplomatic and development missions [34].

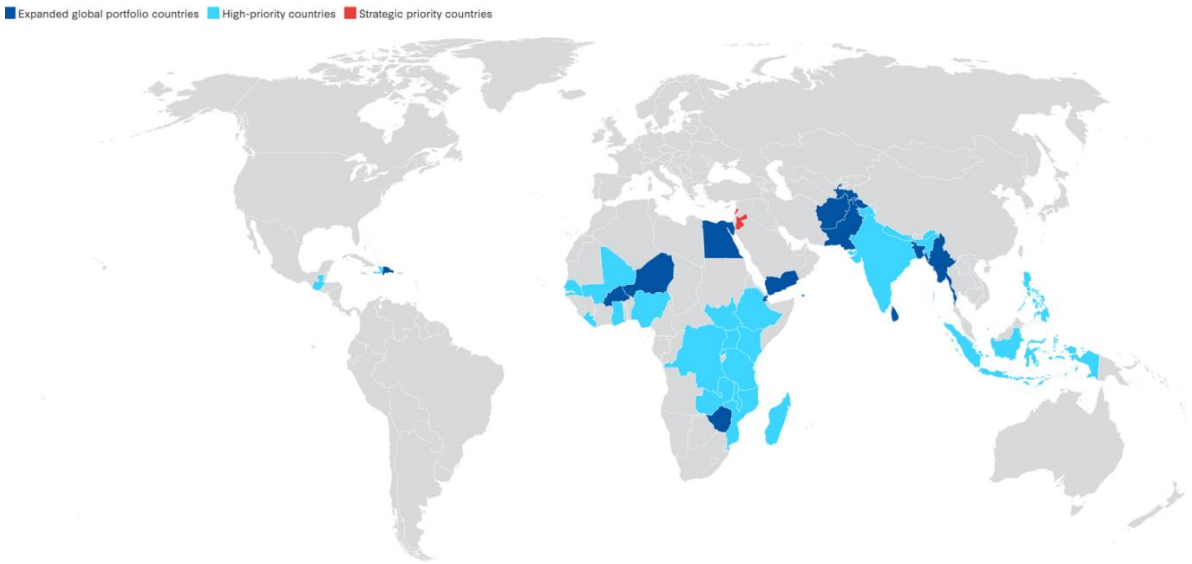

Figure 3. Geographic Distribution of U.S. Global Water Strategy High-Priority and Strategic Priority Countries (2022–2027). World map identifying countries included in the expanded global portfolio (dark blue), high-priority countries (light blue), and strategic priority countries (red) under the U.S. Global Water Strategy 2022–2027. Source: USAID, Global Water Strategy 2024 Annual Report (Washington, DC: USAID, 2024), 12, 28–29.

Deduced goals

Although security is not a formal selection criterion for HPCs, the use of "programmatic feasibility" as a filtering factor has important implications for where and how U.S. water diplomacy concentrates. Empirical analyses of U.S. development assistance seem to support this interpretation. Several analysts argue that allocation patterns do not consistently correspond to levels of objective need, indicating that strategic considerations substantially shape U.S. engagement choices. [36] The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), for

example, argues that U.S. water initiatives have increasingly been integrated into wider strategies addressing fragility, migration, and climate-related security risks, particularly in the period following 2022 [37].

At the level of stated goals, therefore, U.S. water diplomacy presents itself as comprehensive and multidimensional. Whether these objectives can be pursued in a consistent and sustained manner depends, first, on the availability and effective mobilisation of the financial, institutional, and diplomatic instruments required for implementation, and second, on the recent pivot of the Trump administration, which reflects political will. Both of these issues are examined in the following sections.

Resources

Mobilised resources, in the context of the U.S., consist on sustained WASH support, technical expertise, and the ability to leverage the public and private sector. In the last 20 years, Washington has delivered meaningful results in water diplomacy. Since the establishment of the Water for the Poor Act in 2005, when the U.S. Congress made water, sanitation, and hygiene an explicit goal of its foreign aid, tens of millions of people worldwide have gained access to safe, sustainable water services through U.S. assistance. [37] Between 2008 and 2020, USAID programmes have helped 59.5 million people gain access to improved drinking water and 44.6 million to sanitation services. [38] However, these figures only partially illustrate the complete scenario. What distinguishes U.S. mobilisation is the ability to orient partner-government budgets, multilateral development banks and private sector capital.

Within this perspective, U.S. water diplomacy seems to rely less on capital-intensive infrastructure or a normative-first approach, but rather concentrates on the sustained deployment of financial, technical, and institutional assets to be deployed where a long-term presence is possible. The intricate combination of these factors reflects how influence can be projected only when all these resources are mobilised consistently, showcasing another example of the power paradox, in which the possession of financial and technical resources does not automatically translate into influence.

Instruments

Nevertheless, the United States' capacity to pursue its water diplomacy objectives is only partly determined by its substantial financial resources. A significant aspect of its extensive reach is the availability and mobilisation of institutional, scientific, and administrative instruments. In the water domain, these resources have traditionally allowed the United States to translate its objectives into effective engagement. Arguably, the most important mean underpinning U.S. water diplomacy is its institutional capacity. The 2017 Global Water strategy, elaborated by the first Trump administration (2016-2020), already identified the governmental agency USAID as the primary implementing actor, supported by the Department of State and a range of specialised agencies. [39] USAID has proven to be a pillar of the United States' presence worldwide, especially in high-priority regions, enabling engagement in water governance, service delivery, and capacity building. However, the Strategy emphasises that

collaboration among agencies is key to providing a holistic approach to development. The collaboration includes the U.S. Department of State, which provides diplomatic coordination; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which oversees public health concerns and WASH-related outcomes; the U.S. Department of Defense to provide support in stabilisation and security concerns; plus a wide range of technical agencies specialised in environment, financial markets and more. This emphasis on institutions reflects the theoretical approach by which "institutions are the rules of the game in a society" and shape how resources are translated into outcomes (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, 74). [40] In the context of U.S. water diplomacy, this architecture has allowed it to operate over an extended time horizon and to be more decisive in shaping the desired outcomes and influence. Nevertheless, this resource base is highly dependent on institutional continuity and coordination. The implications of this dependence for the resilience of U.S. water diplomacy and the importance of a structured approach emerged in the broader context shortly after the 2024 election.

On July 1st, 2025, the Trump-Vance administration formally announced the closure of USAID, framing the decision as part of a broader federal spending review. The decision to close the principal institution that had structured U.S. foreign presence in the development sector arrived after months of gradually dismantling its structure in the first months of the presidency. [41] The effects of this rupture have already become visible as the ability to pursue complex cross-sectoral strategies has been significantly weakened. Independent assessments have already projected the potential human costs associated with these cuts at more than 14 million deaths globally by 2030. [42] Furthermore, the closure of USAID has created an institutional vacuum in regions where development assistance represents a pivotal instrument of influence. Without U.S. engagement, this gap is likely to be filled by other actors, such as a systemic rival, China, which already has a worldwide presence and is well positioned to expand its footprint, or traditional U.S. partners, like the European Union, may assume a larger role. Either way, the U.S. foreign presence, after decades of strategic development, has receded.

7. Conclusion

The article has examined how the European Union, the People's Republic of China, and the United States integrate water into their external action. Within the framework of Morin and Paquin's analysis, the article argues that water diplomacy, at least for the three actors studied, has become a strategic variable clearly embedded in each actor's foreign policy. The comparative synthesis is presented in the table below.

Table 1. Comparative models of water diplomacy in the EU, PRC, and the United States

Dimension	European Union	People's Republic of China	United States of America
Strategic logic	Normative governance	Infrastructure interdependence	Institutional security
Communicated goals	Water as human right; SDG 6; multilateral governance; peace	Mutual benefit; sovereignty; non-interference; infrastructure connectivity;	Water security; climate resilience; conflict and fragility prevention
Deduced goals	Rule diffusion	Political leverage through infrastructure	Strategic allocation and stability
Core resources	Regulatory and financial platforms	State-backed capital and construction know-how	Institutional network and technical expertise

Primary instruments	Delegation and orchestration	Finance driven bilateral engagement	Interagency coordination
Structural constraint	Perception of conditionality	Debt and environmental criticism	Institutional discontinuity (post 2025)

As the table indicates, the EU's approach emphasises the prevalence of a normative and governance dimension. It integrates water into development cooperation and climate policies, promoting access as a human right and conditioning aid on compliance with environmental standards. Its model, the result of its normative power, seeks to diffuse shared rules through soft power instruments and moderate political conditionality. However, structural constraints remain, as historical legacies, conditionality and fierce competition limit the automatic translation of financial capacity into political influence.

China's model, by contrast, presents a fundamentally different configuration that stems from the decision to position itself as a developing country engaging in South-South cooperation. Nevertheless, the deduced goals reveal a pattern of long-term interdependence based on seemingly unconditional infrastructural leverage. Through the framework of the Belt and Road initiative, it has invested substantial capital in dams and water-related projects in partner countries, strengthening economic ties and providing hydropower as a "public good" (e.g., the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation). The Chinese model combines soft and hard power, but privileges direct bilateral relations with foreign governments. Nevertheless, the end of the first decade of BRI has brought a significant change in China's new investment strategy, encapsulated in the slogan 'Small is beautiful' and the decision to scale up the Green Silk Road. The decision came after 2017, when criticism over the debt burdens and environmental consequences associated with China's earlier mega-infrastructure ventures became prominent. Furthermore, in the same years, the start of a recurrent tariff war with the U.S. and the EU's decision to de-risk its dependence on China have, to some degree, hampered Beijing's economic prospects.

Meanwhile, the United States, until the second Trump administration, has represented a third model, based on a broad network of institutions, deep technical specialisation, and a focus on strategically selected areas and/or countries to prevent conflicts and ensure stability. In this context, since USAID's establishment in 1961, Washington has created a network that has contributed to both humanitarian action and the U.S. image and soft power. Over the years, particularly after the discourse around climate change became prominent, water has acquired a primary role in foreign policy, becoming a matter of both national security and human development.

The formal shutdown of USAID has marked a structural rupture with the model. Dismantling a broad, institutionalized network with worldwide reach greatly undermines the U.S. ability to collect data, information, and intelligence. Unlike financial fluctuations sparked by trade wars, institutional discontinuity can produce long-term effects. In particular, the erosion of operational networks and the fragmentation of expertise can diminish credibility among partner states, potentially making it more costly and requiring time to rebuild, especially as China's 'small and beautiful' project campaign under the BRI is poised to gain relevance.

Despite these differences, the article identifies a common trend. Water has moved from the margins of development policy to the core of geopolitical calculation. Climate stress, transboundary basins, and conflict dynamics have elevated water to a strategic asset in external action, revealing a new lens through which to observe the evolving structure of global power projection in the twenty-first century.

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