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## Upstream Statecraft

### Explaining Variation in China's Transboundary Water Governance Through Security, Energy, and Mutual Benefit

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**Abstract:** This study examines why China's approach to transboundary river governance varies significantly across four regions by applying two parallel analytical frameworks: security interests and environmental vulnerability. The finding shows that China is more willing to cooperate in bilateral settings where strategic goals align with a single neighboring state. For example, cooperation with Kazakhstan is driven by shared interests in counterterrorism and hydropower development. In contrast, cooperation tends to be passive or minimal in multilateral river basins with overlapping sovereignties, such as the Mekong, and nearly absent in politically sensitive regions with resource-scarce neighbors, as seen in the Brahmaputra dispute with India. On the environmental front, China's level of cooperation is most influenced by the degree of downstream vulnerability, followed by the ecological condition of the shared water bodies. This paper concludes by discussing the prevailing academic trend of securitizing transboundary water governance, arguing that such state-centric frameworks risk oversimplifying localized ecological costs and the role of local governments.

**Keywords:** *water governance, hydropolitics, transboundary cooperation models, securitization theory*

## Introduction

China is the most important upstream country for transboundary water and ecological security in Asia. It has 42 major transboundary watercourses and 110 international rivers and lakes shared with 18 downstream countries along its southwest, northwest, and northeast borders.<sup>①</sup> As of 2024, the Asia-Pacific region is still considered relatively water-scarce, with extreme events such as floods and droughts causing significant economic damage.<sup>②</sup> This highlights the fact that water resources remain a critical natural resource for nations, while transboundary water resources raise the complex issue of how countries collaborate in governance and distribution. Whether framed purely as an ecological and environmental security issue or securitized within the realm of water diplomacy, transboundary rivers are a vital component of environmental security.

Generally, China's transboundary rivers can be categorized into four major regions based on geographical orientation, as shown in the table below.

Region	Relevant Countries	Major River	Number of Bilateral Treaties
Northeast	Russia, Mongolia, North Korea	Amur, Yalu, Tumen	28
Northwest	Kazakhstan	Irtysh-Ob, Illi	14
Southeast	Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam	Mekong River basin	9
Southwest	India, Bangladesh	Yarlung Zangbo-Brahmaputra Basin, Indus, Ganges (GBM)	3

**Table 1.1** Regional division of transboundary rivers in China<sup>③</sup>

Regarding the number and provisions of agreements signed on transboundary water governance, China's approaches, and degrees of engagement in managing transboundary rivers, vary across these four regions. Therefore, the research question of this paper is: *Why does China's level of cooperation with different countries and regions in transboundary water governance differ?*

The background to this question is twofold. Firstly, China's political system and

<sup>①</sup> Lei Xie and Jia Shaofeng, *China's International Transboundary Rivers Politics, Security and Diplomacy of Shared Water Resources*, 1st ed, (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>②</sup> Global Water Partnership, 2024, *UN World Water Development Report*, <https://www.gwp.org/en/GWP-China/about-gwp-china/news-list/2024/un-world-water-development-report-2024-new-stage-of-water-development/> (accessed May 9, 2025).

<sup>③</sup> Lei Xie and Jia Shaofeng, *China's International Transboundary Rivers Politics, Security and Diplomacy of Shared Water Resources*, 1st ed, (London: Routledge, 2017).

policy-making process have long been characterized by stability and uniformity, under the leadership of a single party, unlike India, which operates under a cooperative federalism framework. Secondly, the target countries of transboundary river governance are comparable and have entered partnerships with China, such as ASEAN with the Mekong region and BRICS with India. Most of them belong to developing countries or the Global South. Therefore, this paper focuses on what factors have contributed to the differences in the depth and modalities of cooperation between China and different regions, and which factors are more important.

## Literature Review

First, the current academic consensus largely acknowledges that China's governance models across the three major regions differ (with most classifications combining the northeastern and northwestern regions for analysis), adopting a perspective that examines levels of institutionalization.

From the perspective of treaty comparison, most transboundary water treaties pertain to water bodies in northern China, where provisions for measures such as "significant harm" and negotiated compensation are more comprehensive and detailed, as exemplified by the *China-Mongolia Agreement (1994)*. Comparatively, in the southwestern region of China, there are almost no formal arrangements (Chen et al. 2013).<sup>①</sup>This is also reflected in the treaty count statistics shown in Table 1 (Xie & Shao 2017).<sup>②</sup>Regarding the comparison between the two southern regions, China's measures related to river ecological protection, such as water allocation and fish conservation, are more comprehensive in the Mekong River Basin (MRB) (He et al. 2014).<sup>③</sup>

In the quantitative study of treaty significance, Wolf (2013) proposed the Basins at Risk (BAR) rating with an event description framework, distinguishing 15 levels of interaction in water governance, ranging from conflict to deep cooperation.<sup>④</sup> Subsequently, Ho (2017) applied this evaluation standard to analyze China's existing treaties and concluded that China's highest level of cooperation is with Kazakhstan,

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<sup>①</sup> Huiping Chen, Alistair Rieu-Clarke, and Patricia Wouters, "Exploring China's Transboundary Water Treaty Practice through the Prism of the UN Watercourses Convention," *Water International* 38, no. 2 (2013): 217–30.

<sup>②</sup> Lei Xie and Jia Shaofeng, *China's International Transboundary Rivers Politics, Security and Diplomacy of Shared Water Resources*, 1st ed, (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>③</sup> Daming He, Ruidong Wu, Yan Feng, Yungang Li, Chengzhi Ding, Wenling Wang, and Douglas W. Yu, "Review: China's Transboundary Waters: New Paradigms for Water and Ecological Security through Applied Ecology," *The Journal of Applied Ecology* 51, no. 5 (2014): 1159–68.

<sup>④</sup> Aaron Wolf, Shira Yoffe, and Mark Giordano, "International Waters: Identifying Basins at Risk," *Water Policy* 5 (2003): 29–60.

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followed by the Mekong countries, while cooperation with India is the lowest.<sup>①</sup>

Secondly, academics have also conducted more regional comparative studies and analyses of the factors affecting China's transboundary water governance strategies, and this paper will sort out two levels:

(1) From a macro level, based on the environmental, economic, and political temperatures, the three causes of water conflict are: environmental pressures on shared water resources, building and operating infrastructure on shared waterways, and boundary issues caused by rivers (Michel 2020).<sup>②</sup>

Gleditsch (2006) further quantified the factors by quantitatively analyzing the river dataset, proposing eleven hypotheses, and classifying them into four groups based on the degree of sharing of the river, the scarcity of water resources and the way they are allocated, the geographic region, and the level of development of the country.<sup>③</sup> The study contributed two conclusions: 1) the higher the national development factor, the lower the risk of transboundary water conflicts; and 2) the size of the transboundary river basin, i.e., the absolute size of the available resources, constitutes a potential source of conflict, including water-related fisheries, agriculture, industrial production, and urban populations.

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<sup>①</sup> Selina Ho, "China's Transboundary River Policies towards Kazakhstan: Issue-Linkages and Incentives for Cooperation," *Water International* 42, no. 2 (2017): 142–62.

<sup>②</sup> David Michel, *Water Conflict Pathways and Peacebuilding Strategies, Peaceworks*, no. 164 (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2020).

<sup>③</sup> Nils Petter Gleditsch, Kathryn Furlong, Håvard Hegre, Bethany Lacina, and Taylor Owen, "Conflicts over Shared Rivers: Resource Scarcity or Fuzzy Boundaries?," *Political Geography* 25, no. 4 (2006): 361–82.

(2) From China's perspective, as summarized in Table 2.1, the factors influencing China's transboundary water governance include: upstream and downstream geographical positioning, military and diplomatic relations, and domestic factors, as proactive local governments can promote cooperation in transboundary river governance (Zhang & Li 2018).<sup>①</sup> Regarding domestic factors, some scholars argue that the lack of cooperative governance in hydropower development in the MRB is due to a focus on the economic benefits of hydropower financing and investment (Geheb & Suhardiman 2019).<sup>②</sup>

Key Factors	Upstream Advantage & Downstream Vulnerability	Military Security	Diplomatic Relations	Domestic factors
Zhang & Li, 2018	Monglia (Ulungur) Russia (Songhua)	North-Korea (Tumen) vs India (Brahmaputra)		
Ho, 2014		Mekong River Basin vs India (Brahmaputra)		
Geheb & Suhardiman, 2019				Mekong River Basin
Biba, 2014		Kazakhstan (Irtysh and Ili)		
Ho, 2017		Kazakhstan (Irtysh and Ili)		

**Table 2.1** Key factors mentioned in the literature

Ho (2014) adopts a more realist perspective, arguing that water governance operates within a broader political context.<sup>③</sup> He concludes that the MRB holds greater military significance than the Brahmaputra River, prompting China to establish more cooperative mechanisms in the former. Similarly, the influence of political factors is evident in China's transboundary water cooperation with Kazakhstan (Biba 2014; Ho 2017).<sup>④</sup>

In summary, through the literature review, it can be observed that the level of cooperation

<sup>①</sup> Hongzhou Zhang and Mingjiang Li, "A Process-Based Framework to Examine China's Approach to Transboundary Water Management," *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 34, no. 5 (2018): 705–31.

<sup>②</sup> Kim Geheb and Diana Suhardiman, "The Political Ecology of Hydropower in the Mekong River Basin," *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 37 (2019): 8–13.

<sup>③</sup> Selina Ho, "River Politics: China's Policies in the Mekong and the Brahmaputra in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 85 (2013): 1–20.

<sup>④</sup> Sebastian Biba, "China Cooperates with Central Asia over Shared Rivers," *China Dialogue*, 2014, <https://dialogue.earth/en/energy/6741-china-cooperates-with-central-asia-over-shared-rivers/> (accessed May 9, 2025); Ho, "China's Transboundary River Policies," 145.

China has in transboundary water governance, as indicated in Table 1.1, decreases from Northeast to Southwest. Regarding the reasons, existing literature has made comparisons across certain regions and examined the factors listed in Table 2.1. However, the existing literature does not answer all the questions. On one hand, the literature does not reference cases from all regions or compare the degree to which these factors influence decision-making, nor does it assess the relative importance of these factors. On the other hand, most of these analyses are from China's perspective, without considering whether the cooperation attitudes of other countries might influence China's strategies.

## **Comparison of Key Factors Affecting Transboundary Water Governance in China**

Based on the literature review, this paper aims to discuss which of these factors are more important for China and more likely to facilitate cooperation and what are their priorities?

Firstly, China cooperates on transboundary rivers when it is in its own interest and when it believes it will benefit from the cooperation, which is the highest priority condition affecting cooperation. Beneficial can be defined in two ways: one is when China is located in a small number of downstream transboundary rivers with high ecological vulnerability, where more cooperation agreements and sound mechanisms are conducive to the protection of downstream water quality and quantity; and the other is when China's cooperation with the target country can be mutually beneficial by yielding rewards in terms of, for example, matters of critical national security.

### ***Environmental Concerns***

Mongolia is the only upstream country for China's transboundary rivers. The two rivers that flow from Mongolia—namely, the Ulungur River, the main source of Tarim River, and the Oro River, the main source of the Heilong River in northern China—are among the few rivers where China is located downstream. The administrative regions of the Ulungur River primarily involve the western parts of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, areas that are relatively arid and water-scarce year-round<sup>①</sup>. As a result, China and Mongolia have signed four agreements related to the Ulungur River and other transboundary waters, including China's first water treaty. The agreements specify strict obligations for ecosystem protection and transboundary damage, such as the provision that “any development or

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<sup>①</sup> 何大明, 李运刚, 和冯彦, “我国国际河流开发与地缘合作挑战”, *地理教育*, no.Z2(2013): 4-6.

use of transboundary waters should not be detrimental” (Art. 4).<sup>①</sup>

In contrast, in the case of the Amur River Basin, China shares more transboundary water resources with Russia than with any other country, while the agreement on the rivers’ ecological system is not as comprehensive as that between China and Mongolia.<sup>②</sup> While the USSR-China Joint Comprehensive Scheme was established in 1986, and hydrological data was shared, China nevertheless overlooked the joint scheme’s review in 2009 and constructed the Hailaer-Dalai Water Transfer Canal at the source of the Amur River.

### **Security and Diplomatic Factors**

Factors in terms of mutual benefits can be summarized as military security and diplomatic relations in Table 2, focusing on groundbreaking energy as well as security-related exchanges that are crucial for China. This can be highlighted by comparing transboundary water cooperation between China-Kazakhstan with China-Myanmar and China-India.

Kazakhstan, as a downstream country, has signed 14 agreements between the two countries as of 2023, starting with the first consultation in 1999, covering topics such as disaster prevention, exchange of hydrological information, water quality, environmental protection, water allocation, and etc.<sup>③</sup> The two countries have had a strategic partnership since 2005, but Kazakhstan still maintains a foreign policy based on pragmatic, non-ideological considerations aimed at self-interest and self-protection.<sup>④</sup> As a result, Chinese-Kazakhstan cooperation in transboundary waters largely maintains a tone of maintaining close and friendly relations between the two sides.

Kazakhstan’s security importance is reflected in its cooperation with China in countering terrorism and maintaining stability on its borders, particularly in the fight against Uyghur separatism in the Xinjiang region.<sup>⑤</sup> Meanwhile, as the world’s largest producer of natural uranium, Kazakhstan has huge potential for future cooperation with China in new energy sources of nuclear energy, such as the nearly 50% acquisition of Kazatomprom’s subsidiary by CGNPC Mining in

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<sup>①</sup> Huiping Chen, Alistair Rieu-Clarke, and Patricia Wouters, “Exploring China’s Transboundary Water Treaty Practice through the Prism of the UN Watercourses Convention,” *Water International* 38, no. 2 (2013): 217–30.

<sup>②</sup> Eugene Simonov and Eugene Egidarev, “Intergovernmental Cooperation on the Amur River Basin Management in the Twenty-First Century,” *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 34, no. 5 (2017): 771–91.

<sup>③</sup> 郝少英, “中哈跨界河流合作: 进程、机遇与深化路径”, *新疆大学学报 (哲学社会科学版)* 52, no.1 (2024): 63-71.

<sup>④</sup> Sebastian Biba, “Desecuritization in China’s Behavior towards Its Transboundary Rivers: The Mekong River, the Brahmaputra River, and the Irtysh and Ili Rivers,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 85 (2013): 21–43.

<sup>⑤</sup> Selina Ho, “China’s Transboundary River Policies towards Kazakhstan: Issue-Linkages and Incentives for Cooperation,” *Water International* 42, no. 2 (2017): 142–62.

2021, which amounts to the world's largest uranium project in the last decade.<sup>①</sup>

The priority and importance of cooperation in the Mekong River Basin have also increased as China has expanded its collaboration with Southeast Asian countries on key cross-border criminal activities, such as telecom network fraud and drug trafficking. In 2024, China, along with Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, conducted joint exercises aimed at combating illegal activities in the Mekong River Basin.

Previously, the *Mekong River Agreement (1995)*, which includes China, was considered to lack any practical effectiveness, and China had been criticized for building large hydropower stations in the upstream Mekong region, neglecting the impact on downstream communities, and thereby damaging local environments and ecosystems.<sup>②</sup> After 2015, China has demonstrated a more proactive approach to collaborating with other countries to promote sustainable development in the region. One significant development was the introduction of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism in 2015, which includes transboundary water governance as well as issues related to navigation security, cross-border drug trafficking, and human trafficking.

However, the MRB has more cooperating countries relative to Kazakhstan, and will involve the ceding of sovereignty by different countries. For example, on the LMC joint patrols, Chinese patrol vessels are not allowed to enter Thai waters during patrols, and can only enforce the law in Myanmar and Laos waters.<sup>③</sup> After escorting a merchant vessel to the Golden Triangle, the China-Myanmar joint patrols need to be handed over to the Thai Marine Police for an onward escort to Chiang Saen harbor in Thailand. Similarly, the adequacy of sovereign crossings is directly related to the effectiveness of cross-border water security.

Taking the same combined security-energy perspective and looking back at the transboundary water cooperation between China and India, one can see that the level of cooperation between the two countries has declined drastically in the aftermath of the Donglang border standoff, and that China began refusing to share hydrological data on the Brahmaputra River with India in 2017. As India has violated China's sovereignty in Donglang, destroying the mutual trust that the two neighbors used to enjoy, it will be difficult for China to cooperate with India on other issues.<sup>④</sup>

<sup>①</sup> 中国地质调查局, *中广核集团签约哈萨克斯坦奥尔塔雷克公司股权转让交易*, 2021, <http://ggmeta.cgs.gov.cn/DepositsNewsCen.aspx?id=2975> (accessed May 9, 2025).

<sup>②</sup> Evelyn Goh, *Developing the Mekong: Regionalism and Regional Security in China–Southeast Asian Relations*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>③</sup> 卢光盛, 张励, '澜沧江—湄公河合作机制与跨境安全治理', *南洋问题研究*, no. 3 (2016): 12–22.

<sup>④</sup> Y. Zhao, "China Has to Halt River Data Sharing as India Infringes on Sovereignty: Expert," *Global Times*, August 23, 2017,

Meanwhile, in terms of security strategy, not only has India failed to cooperate with China to help fight separatism in the Tibetan region, but it has also strengthened its hostile stance towards India by supporting the Special Frontier Force, an independent armed force in Tibet, around 2020 and has drawn warnings from China.<sup>①</sup> From 2016 to 2017, actions such as the Indian President’s meeting with Dalai Lama, his visit to the disputed border region of Arunachal Pradesh (which is also where the cross-border river between India and China passes through), and the publicizing of the Tibetan flag were more of the opposite signals of cooperation.

Thus, summarizing the above comparison, the prioritization of factors affecting China’s level of cooperation in water governance is shown in Figure 3.1. The absence of conflict in environmental vulnerability is largely due to the fact that China is basically in the upper reaches of Asia and is a large Asian country, so it is rare for China to provoke disputes upstream because of its own water and ecological scarcity.

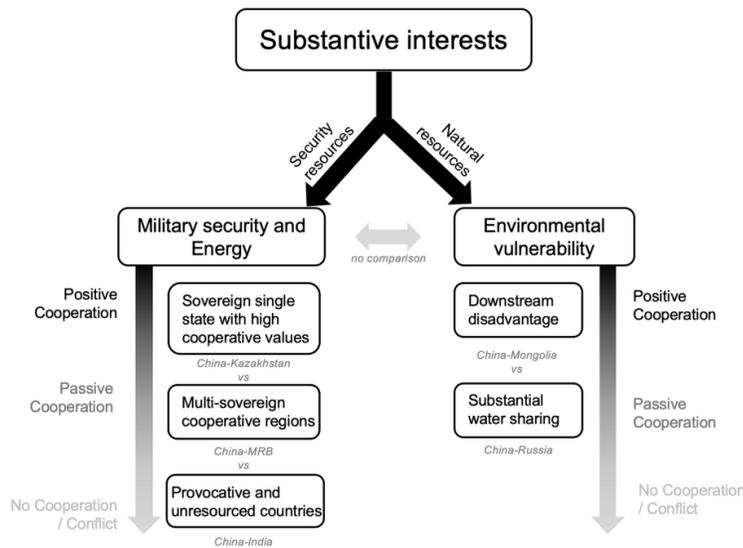


Figure 3.1 Ranking the importance of factors affecting transboundary water governance in China

### Securitization of Water

Unsurprisingly, much of the discussion on transboundary water is coupled with a larger political context, and when discussing the differences in transboundary water cooperation between China and different regions, it usually incorporates considerations of more macro-geographic

<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1062249.shtml> (accessed May 9, 2025).

<sup>①</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, “India’s ‘Tibet Card’ in the Stand-Off with China: More Provocative than Productive,” *China Brief* 20, no. 17 (2020).

factors or political mutual trust. Thus, some scholars have also argued that transboundary water governance has been securitized.

First of all, securitization, by definition, is closely linked to the power and interests of the state. Securitizing an issue consists of two stages: firstly, actors label an issue as secure, and then the associated security issues are recognized by a specific audience as an existential threat.<sup>①</sup>

However, securitization brings certain problems. On the one hand, considering transboundary water resources from the perspective of the common interests of nation-states can overlook the real challenges to local survival.<sup>②</sup> As a waterway, the river is constructed as a manageable resource, divorced from its wider environmental context and social uses or cultural values. On the other hand, the securitization of water treats the state as a unit of variable, but ignores the undue influence of competing interests or bureaucratic corruption within the state, which means that perhaps the roles and outcomes of individuals or parts of organizations are magnified for the state as a whole.

Therefore, it has also been argued that water governance should be securitized, and that China's current transboundary water policy focuses on various forms of intermittent cooperation rather than having a holistic strategy (Biba 2013).<sup>③</sup>

## Conclusion

To summarize, this paper is divided into three main parts to discuss the research question of why China has different levels of cooperation and participation in transboundary water governance. Firstly, the factual background to which this paper refers is based on the fact that transboundary water cooperation in China is more comprehensive and deeper in the North, followed by Southeast Asia, while there is almost no cooperation in South Asia. From the existing literature combing, upstream advantage and downstream vulnerability, military and security cooperation, diplomatic relations, and domestic factors are the four main categories of elements that influence China's strategy.

In the second section, the paper uses case comparisons to rank the importance of the existing factors and the extent to which they can lead to cooperation. China, due to its upstream national

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① 李兴, & 耿捷, “安全化”与“去安全化”:中哈跨界河流合作中的问题与对策, 国外理论动态, 11(2019):115-127.

② Douglas P. Hill, “Where Hawks Dwell on Water and Bankers Build Power Poles: Transboundary Waters, Environmental Security and the Frontiers of Neo-Liberalism,” *Strategic Analysis* 39, no. 6 (2015): 729-43.

③ Sebastian Biba, “Desecuritization in China's Behavior towards Its Transboundary Rivers: The Mekong River, the Brahmaputra River, and the Irtysh and Ili Rivers,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 85 (2013): 21-43.

advantages, mainly considers whether actions fulfill its own interests in transboundary water governance. In terms of environmental vulnerability, downstream is key to enabling cooperation between China and Mongolia, while the size of the shared basin water resources is less important. From a security perspective, China favors countries that can provide offshore military or anti-crime cooperation for mutual benefit. At the same time, stable and bilateral forms of cooperation are preferred over groups of countries with complex sovereignty. India, on the other hand, as a country with potential border and sovereignty conflicts loses China's mutual trust in more other areas and therefore cooperates the least.

Finally, the paper considers the potential problems of securitizing the topic of water governance, namely that assessing rivers as holistic resources in a highly abstract way may bias the analysis due to the dominance of local governments and the specificity of river basin inhabitants.

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