



NAVIGATING WATER TENSIONS: UNRAVELING THE DESECURITIZATION DISCOURSE IN CENTRAL ASIA

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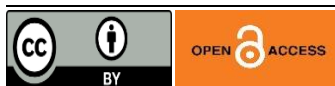
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ABSTRACT

This article explores the technical and practical nature of the "desecuritization" of transnational water disputes in Central Asia, shedding light on alternative approaches to foster cooperation and mitigate regional tensions. The article delves into potential desecuritization strategies, offering practical perspectives for managing transboundary water conflicts. The central question guiding this research is: how do discourses on water security contribute to regional tensions in Central Asia, and to what extent can desecuritization efforts provide alternative pathways for transboundary water governance? By examining specific cases, including major dam projects, the study aims to uncover securitization mechanisms and explore plausible strategies for desecuritization. Utilizing a critical discourse analysis methodology of the Copenhagen School, the article deconstructs narratives shaping water security in Central Asia.

KEYWORDS

water security, Copenhagen School, desecuritization, Central Asia, international relations, transboundary water conflicts



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INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic landscape of the 21st century, traditional notions of security have undergone significant transformations, necessitating a reevaluation of frameworks applied to global challenges. Particularly within the realm of environmental concerns, the intersection of security and resource management has become a focal point for scholarly inquiry. This article explores the intricate dynamics of transnational water disputes, examining the concept of desecuritization as a potential paradigm shift in addressing these challenges.

Barry Buzan's seminal work on security provides a foundational perspective for understanding the evolution of security concepts in the post-Cold War era, including the necessary redefinition of security beyond its military nature. Buzan's concept of extending

security to diverse realms, including economic, political, and societal aspects, serves as a theoretical underpinning for this study (Buzan, 1991). Moreover, Richard Ullmann's contribution to the discourse on security redefinition prompts an exploration of how perceptions of security influence the framing of issues and subsequent policy responses (Ullman, 1983; Wæver, 1995; Buzan, Wæver, de Wilde, 1998; Barnett, 2001; Futter, 2014; Girard, 2019). These works provide the opportunity for this article to analyze security problems in a broader context, such as considering access to water as one of the major security problems in the world.

The focal point of this article is the context of water security and scarcity, which are critical dimensions that intertwine environmental sustainability, human well-being, and geopolitical considerations. As populations grow and climate change intensifies, water resources become increasingly scarce, emphasizing the importance of water security on the global agenda. Understanding the nuances of water security is essential to appreciate the complexities inherent in transnational water management systems.

Transnational water management systems, which involve shared water resources across borders, present unique challenges that can escalate into disputes, tensions, and conflicts. As water becomes a strategic resource, the potential for these issues to be framed within a security discourse raises questions about the effectiveness of such securitization. This article aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding water diplomacy by exploring the potential benefits of desecuritization in transnational water disputes.

Through an examination of real-world case studies and theoretical scenarios, this research aims to shed light on the consequences of framing water issues as security concerns. By critically evaluating the intersections of Buzan's extended security concept (Buzan, 1991), Ullmann's security redefinition (Ullman, 1983), and the specificities of water security in transnational contexts, the article strives to offer insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners grappling with the complexities of managing water resources on a global scale through desecuritization's mechanism on the example of dams in Central Asia.

1 METHODOLOGY

I will utilize the following research approaches, techniques, and methods: the theory of securitization, case study analysis, comparative analysis of transnational water disputes data in Central Asia. The primary conceptual lens for analyzing transnational water disputes will be the theory of securitization. This entails examining how water issues are presented as security threats, the consequences of such securitization, and potential frames for desecuritization in Central Asia. The research will involve a thorough review of literature, policy documents, and media reports to identify instances where water disputes are still securitized or desecuritized. This approach will aid in understanding the discourse

surrounding water security and its influence on policy decisions. The article will use case studies of real-world transnational water disputes to provide empirical evidence and contextualize the theoretical discussions. Case selection will consider the diversity of dam projects in Central Asia, the severity of conflicts, and the outcomes of different approaches to dispute resolution, including those related to dams. Through detailed analyses of specific cases, the research will explore the various examples of desecuritization in mitigating tensions. To enhance the generalizability of findings, a comparative analysis will be conducted across multiple dam projects as transnational water disputes. By using these research approaches, techniques, and methods, the article aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the desecuritization of transnational water disputes in the context of evolving security paradigms. The combination of theoretical frameworks, empirical case studies, and comparative analyses will contribute to a thorough exploration of the research questions and facilitate well-informed policy recommendations.

Drawing on regional case studies, policy documents, and diplomatic discourses, the research identifies instances of desecuritization, enriching the understanding of this complex phenomenon. While the research is ongoing, preliminary findings suggest that the securitization of water issues exacerbates regional tensions, necessitating a shift towards desecuritization for sustainable transboundary water governance. Initial case analyses indicate the potential of diplomatic efforts and collaborative projects as desecuritization strategies.

The primary research question focuses on examining how water security discourses influence regional tensions in Central Asia and to what degree desecuritization strategies may offer alternative approaches to transboundary water governance.

This article makes a vital contribution to the academic discourse on water diplomacy by offering a nuanced analysis of desecuritization efforts in Central Asia. Scholars, policymakers, and water resource managers will benefit from insights into alternative approaches to managing transnational water conflicts, fostering cooperation, and ensuring regional stability. As the region grapples with the intersection of geopolitics and water resources, this article aims to provide a concise yet impactful contribution to ongoing discussions surrounding water security in Central Asia.

While there may not be an extensive body of literature specifically focused on the desecuritization of water problems as a singular topic, scholars often address aspects of desecuritization within broader discussions on water governance, diplomacy, and conflict resolution. Here are few references that touch upon desecuritization of water issues:

- Climate change, securitisation and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (article), (Mason, 2013);
- Desecuritisation of water and the technocratic turn in peacebuilding (article), (Aggestam, 2015);
- The Securitization and Desecuritization of Water (book chapter), (Aryaeinejad, Brinkley, Budak, Chalphin, Hickel, Neusner, Obi, Pecorella, 2015).

In these articles, the authors discuss efforts to desecuritize the Middle East region. They provide insights into attempts to move away from framing water issues as security concerns and instead emphasize cooperation. Hence, my article critically examines the securitization of transnational water disputes in the countries of Central Asia and explores the potential for desecuritization as a transformative approach to address shared water challenges. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of securitization, particularly drawing from the Copenhagen School, and concepts of extending security, the study investigates the narratives and practices that frame water-related issues as security threats in the region. Focusing on key cases such as the Rogun and Nurek dams in Tajikistan, the Kambarata dams in Kyrgyzstan, and others, as well as the implications for downstream countries, the research analyzes the securitization processes that contribute to regional tensions.

In parallel, the article explores instances of desecuritization, examining diplomatic efforts, regional cooperation initiatives, and international mediation as strategies to move beyond the securitized discourse. Drawing on case studies, including multilateral projects and environmental impact assessments, the research assesses the effectiveness of desecuritization measures in promoting collaborative water management practices. Furthermore, the study considers the role of scientific cooperation, stakeholder engagement, and inclusive dialogue in reshaping the narrative around transnational water disputes.

2 DESECURITIZATION AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR HYDROPOLITICAL STRATEGIES

Critical Security Studies challenges traditional notions of security and questions power dynamics in security practices. It examines how security issues are constructed, the impact of securitization, and the role of identity and discourse in shaping security policies. In this context, the Theory of Securitization studies the process by which issues are framed as security threats and how these framing influences policy decisions. It includes the analysis of both securitization and desecuritization processes. Desecuritization refers to the process by which problems that were previously securitized are de-escalated and transferred back to the realm of normal political reality. In this context, they can be addressed through the standard rules and regulations of (democratic) politics. It's crucial to note that achieving security is not the ultimate goal; rather, the endpoint is the removal of the problem from the broader security discourse. A classic example of desecuritization is the post-World War II relationship between France and Germany.

Their interactions evolved from security-based to normal political relations. An illustrative case of desecuritization in the Central Asian region is the handling of the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Here, the issue has shifted from being primarily a security concern to one addressed through conventional political means. Desecuritization, then, is the process by which a political community downplays or ceases to treat something as an existential threat to a significant point of reference. This involves

limiting or discontinuing the call for urgent and extraordinary measures to address the perceived threat (Buzan, Wæver, 2003, p. 56). The desecuritization process may encounter certain constraints stemming from political culture, external factors, and evolving national circumstances (Aras, Polat, 2008, p. 497).

Representatives of the Copenhagen School argue that securitizations are not morally correct, while desecuritizations are considered morally justifiable (Buzan, Wæver, de Wilde, 1998). B. Buzan even expresses a normative preference for desecuritization over securitization. It is important to note that these conclusions were reached through an analysis of the consequences of both processes. In this context, we can assume that the processes of securitization and desecuritization are closely linked to patterns of friendship and hostility. These patterns range from conflict formations, where the source of security interdependence is rooted in fears and rivalries, to security regimes, and finally, to security communities. These classifications also highlight how system members perceive each other (as enemy, rival, or friend). Therefore, the moral character of securitization and desecuritization processes arises from the course, nature, and—above all—the consequences of these processes.

B. Buzan points out that beyond the security community, there exists regional integration, signifying the end of anarchy and the transfer of security issues to the internal sphere (Buzan, 1991). The classic approach defines a security community as a group of states that, through integration, have established a sense of community. This expression is manifested through the creation of effective and common institutions and practices, ensuring peaceful coexistence and the resolution of issues without resorting to the threat or use of force (Konopacki, 1998, p. 38). The development of a security community is characterized by processes of desecuritization. Actors cease to perceive each other as enemies and security threats, shifting to a framework where they treat each other as friends. While they may still compete and face challenges, they approach these issues as ordinary political, economic, ecological, or social problems rather than security threats requiring extraordinary countermeasures (Buzan, Wæver, 2003, p. 56).

As Vuori explains, *the desired outcome is desecuritization, which brings back a sense of security or, conversely, an absence of threat, eliminating the need for restrictive measures* (Vuori, 2011). According to T. Balzacq, a securitizing actor can obtain two types of support from recipients: formal and moral. In many cases, actors securitize issues without the moral support of the audience, and formal support is often a prerequisite for successful securitization. As outlined by O. Wæver, in the progression of a problem into a security threat, the state may invoke the special right to be the final authority. Under this right, the ultimate definition of the threat can only be approved by the state or its elites (Wæver, 1995), which has moral consequences for the actions taken by decision-makers.

Moreover, according to J. Czaputowicz, *the question of why a particular issue qualifies as a security issue inherently carries an ethical dimension. The consequentialist*

position assumes that security is linked to the prevailing value system. It serves a positive function when it aligns with the political interests of the majority, resolving a given problem more swiftly, efficiently, and effectively than ordinary political means. Otherwise, it has a negative impact (Czaputowicz, 2012).

Considering the relationship between politicization and securitization, *politicization, from the standpoint of democratic normative theory, is seen as a positive phenomenon, while securitization is viewed as a negative one. Securitization is a one-time act; conversely, desecuritization is a process. Therefore, it is easier to securitize something than to desecuritize it and return to the state of 'normal' politics (Czaputowicz, 2012).* Securitization represents a radical form of depoliticization with elements of security and war rhetoric, which excludes certain issues from political debate.

Securitization is a radical form of depoliticization that incorporates elements of security and war rhetoric, effectively excluding certain issues from political debate. In the process of desecuritization, there is no need to resort to decisions involving the use of force in order to protect a reference object that is existentially threatened. Desecuritizations also avoid morally questionable decisions that would require disrupting public order and often sacrificing individuals for the sake of state security. In the context of desecuritization, it becomes much easier to gain acceptance and moral support from audience because a given problem is transferred from the realm of security to the realm of politics.

The establishment of a nuclear-free zone by the countries in the region is an example of a voluntarily and consciously created security regime, indicating the shift of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction from security policy to ordinary politics. Therefore, it serves as a case study of successful desecuritization in Central Asia and the achievement of non-proliferation goals since the end of the Cold War. Therefore, considering the experience of Central Asian countries in this area, it is valuable to present the effects of desecuritization in other domains, using the example of transboundary water disputes in Central Asia.

3 EFFORTS OF DESECURITIZATION OF TRANSBOUNDARY WATER DISPUTES IN CENTRAL ASIA

In this substantive section of my article, I present the most significant instances of desecuritization efforts in Central Asia, specifically transboundary and regional disputes related to existing or planned dams in the region. The Rogun Dam in Central Asia has been a source of contention and debate among the countries in the region, particularly Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Located on the Vakhsh River in Tajikistan, the Rogun Dam is one of the largest hydropower projects in the region. Disputes have arisen regarding water management, environmental impacts, and concerns about the potential effects on downstream countries, especially Uzbekistan. While the Rogun Dam has caused tension,

there have also been instances of desecuritization observed in regional dialogues. Regional actors, including Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, have engaged in diplomatic dialogues and negotiations to address concerns related to the Rogun Dam (Musioł, 2024, p. 191-205; *Tashkent Time*, 2022). These discussions aim to find cooperative solutions and move away from framing the issue solely as a security threat. Furthermore, efforts from international organizations and third-party mediators to facilitate discussions have contributed to desecuritization. By involving neutral actors, the focus can shift from a securitized discourse to a more cooperative and solution-oriented approach. Conducting comprehensive environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs) can be seen as a desecuritization effort. By engaging in transparent assessments and involving relevant stakeholders, countries can address concerns about the dam's impact on the environment and local communities. Encouraging scientific cooperation and sharing data on water resources can also contribute to desecuritization. Collaborative efforts to monitor and manage water resources foster trust and move away from a strictly security-oriented perspective. The involvement of regional and international organizations, such as the United Nations, World Bank, Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program - CAREC, and other relevant entities, can provide platforms for multilateral cooperation. By framing the Rogun Dam issue within a broader development context, the narrative can shift away from strict security concerns. It is important to note that the situation may have evolved, and there may have been new developments or changes in regional dynamics.

The Nurek Dam, located on the Vakhsh River in Tajikistan, has been a significant hydropower project in Central Asia. Like other large dam projects in the region, it has been a subject of discussion and potential tension among countries in Central Asia, particularly Tajikistan and downstream countries such as Uzbekistan. Disputes have centered around water management, energy production, and concerns about downstream impacts. While the Nurek Dam has been associated with security-related concerns, examples of desecuritization—efforts to move away from framing the issue solely in security terms—can be identified in various aspects. Efforts towards regional cooperation and collaboration among Central Asian countries have been observed. Dialogue platforms, such as the Central Asian Energy Water Development Program and the United Nations Development Programme - UNDP, provide spaces for discussions on shared water resources, including those related to the Nurek Dam (UNDP, 2022). Conducting thorough environmental impact assessments (EIAs) and sharing the results with downstream countries can be considered a desecuritization effort. By addressing concerns about the environmental impacts of the Nurek Dam, countries can work towards cooperative solutions. Promoting scientific and technical cooperation in monitoring and managing water resources can contribute to desecuritization. Shared data, research collaborations, and joint projects in the field of water management foster trust and move away from a strictly security-oriented perspective. Involvement of international organizations and donors in projects related to the Nurek Dam can contribute to desecuritization. International actors can provide technical expertise,

facilitate dialogue, and promote cooperative approaches. Framing discussions around the Nurek Dam within the broader context of regional energy cooperation can be a desecuritization strategy. Emphasizing the potential benefits of energy sharing and joint infrastructure projects may help alleviate security concerns. The World Bank plays a significant role in providing financial and technical assistance. It supports projects like Kambarata-1 and Kambarata-2 by helping to frame them within a cooperative and economically beneficial context. The World Bank also helps facilitate agreements that ensure equitable water and energy distribution. The governments of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan are actively involved in negotiating and implementing agreements related to water management (*Diplomat Magazine*, 2023). With regard to Toktogul’s Dam, regional institutions such as the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) and the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC) have been established to create and enforce agreements on water usage and management. The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), provide technical and financial support for the maintenance and improvement of water infrastructure. For instance, the ADB is funding rehabilitation projects at Toktogul and other hydropower plants to enhance efficiency and sustainability (Asian Development Bank, 2023). United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) has played a significant role in assessing hazards and implementing risk reduction strategies for Sarez Lake (Asian Disaster Reduction Center, 2023). They have been involved in setting up early warning systems and conducting community training programs.

Dams and tensions in Central Asia have been a longstanding issue primarily related to water resource management, energy production, and the downstream impacts of large hydropower projects. The countries in the region, including Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, have been involved in disputes over the construction and operation of dams. Here are some examples in the summarized Table 1 and Table 2:

Table 1 Major dams oriented transboundary water disputes – level of desecuritization

Dams /states affected	Factors leading to securitization	Effective desecuritization measures
<p>Rogun</p> <p>Tajikistan Uzbekistan Turkmenistan</p>	<p>The Rogun Dam on the Vakhsh River in Tajikistan has been a major source of tension in the region. The construction of the dam, which is one of the tallest in the world, has raised concerns in downstream Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The issues include potential disruptions in water flow, agriculture, and energy production downstream.</p>	<p>Conducting comprehensive environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs)</p> <p>The involvement of regional and international organizations, such as the United Nations, World Bank, Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program - CAREC, and other relevant entities, can provide platforms for multilateral cooperation.</p>

<p>Nurek</p> <p>Tajikistan Uzbekistan</p>	<p>The Nurek Dam in Tajikistan is one of the largest dams in the world. Its operation has implications for downstream countries, particularly Uzbekistan. Disputes have arisen regarding water management practices, energy production, and concerns about the environmental and social impacts on the Aral Sea basin.</p>	<p>Dialogue platforms, such as the Central Asian Energy Water Development Program and the United Nations Development Programme - UNDP, provide spaces for discussions on shared water resources, including those related to the Nurek Dam.</p> <p>Conducting thorough environmental impact assessments (EIAs) and sharing the results with downstream countries</p> <p>The World Bank and its role.</p>
<p>Kambarata-1 Kambarata-2</p> <p>Kyrgyzstan Uzbekistan</p>	<p>Kyrgyzstan's plans to construct hydropower dams on the Naryn River, known as Kambarata-1 and Kambarata-2, have caused tensions with downstream Uzbekistan. Concerns include the potential reduction of water flow, which would impact agricultural activities in the Fergana Valley.</p>	<p>Financial and technical assistance of the World Bank.</p> <p>The World Bank's role of facilitating agreements that ensure equitable water and energy distribution.</p>
<p>Toktogul</p> <p>Kyrgyzstan Kazakhstan Uzbekistan</p>	<p>The Toktogul Dam on the Naryn River is a significant reservoir that plays a crucial role in distributing water among Central Asian countries. Disputes over water allocation and reservoir management have led to tensions between Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.</p>	<p>The involvement of regional institutions such as the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) and the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC).</p> <p>Financial and technical assistance of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.</p> <p>The ADB's role in rehabilitation projects to enhance efficiency and sustainability.</p>
<p>Sarez Lake</p> <p>Tajikistan Uzbekistan Afghanistan</p>	<p>While not a traditional dam, the potential threat of a dam breach induced by a landslide in 1911 at Lake Sarez in Tajikistan has raised concerns in downstream countries. An outburst flood could affect the Panj River,</p>	<p>UNDRR and its role in assessing hazards and implementing risk reduction strategies and setting up early warning systems and conducting community training programs.</p>

	thereby impacting Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.	
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Source: author based on his research in Kazakhstan.

Table 2 Desecuritizing actors and level of transboundary water desecuritization

Dams	Level of transboundary water desecuritization	
	Sample desecuritizing actors	Low/medium/high
Rogun	IGOs: ADB, UN, EU, CAREC, ISAF; states: USA, Japan	Low
Nurek		High
Kambarata-1 Kambarata-2		Medium
Toktogul		Low
Sarez Lake		Medium

Source: author based on his research in Central Asia.

The competition for water resources in the Amu Darya and Syr Darya river basins has led to ongoing tensions. Downstream countries, particularly Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, heavily rely on water from these rivers for agriculture, and any upstream developments can affect their water availability. These examples highlight the complex interplay of geopolitics, energy needs, and environmental concerns in the context of dam construction and water management in Central Asia. The potential for disputes over water resources remains a significant challenge in the region, necessitating ongoing diplomatic efforts and cooperative solutions that still integrate both political dialogue and security discourse.

As shown in Table 2, the actors involved in desecuritization encompass various entities with direct or indirect influence, including states and international organizations both within and outside the region. In the context of states outside Central Asia (the table is not exhaustive and only provides a few examples of entities with the highest levels of activity and influence), their engagement is not exclusively determined by threats. Nonetheless, their role in the desecuritization process is of considerable importance due to their investment, economic involvement, and, fundamentally, pro-environmental considerations. These actors are motivated by the desire to foster a conducive political and social environment. Conversely, the mitigation of existing disputes surrounding dams is essential, not only symbolically but also practically, in halting the escalation of such threats and preventing the spillover of conflicts. Owing to the legacy of the Soviet Union, water-related conflicts have evolved into both a symbolic and tangible issue of regional and international significance in recent decades. Thus, the involvement of extra-regional actors may result in both positive and negative consequences for desecuritization. Paradoxically, their engagement could prompt securitization tendencies when the interests of only one side of regional security complexes are prioritized, as seen in the role of the USA, the EU, and the World Bank in the Aral Sea Basin (the case of the Kokaral dam in 2005) — specifically, Kazakhstan versus Uzbekistan during the rule of Islam Karimov. The European Union's involvement in the region, particularly regarding disputes over hydroelectric dams,

stems from its broader role in global environmental protection policies. This focus, coupled with an emphasis on human rights and the rule of law, often acts as an impediment to the advancement of economic and energy cooperation with regional countries. Consequently, the EU is not perceived as an effective agent of desecuritization in this context.

CONCLUSION

The desecuritization of transnational water disputes in Central Asia emerges as a critical focal point for fostering cooperation and mitigating regional tensions. This article has shed light on alternative pathways for transboundary water governance by exploring the nature of desecuritization and their importance in hydropolitical strategies.

The central question guiding this research is how discourses on water security contribute to regional tensions in Central Asia and to what extent desecuritization efforts can provide alternative pathways for transboundary water governance. This question has been approached through a critical discourse analysis methodology. By deconstructing narratives that shape water security in the region and drawing on regional case studies, policy documents, and diplomatic discourses, this study has identified instances of desecuritization and enriched our understanding of this complex phenomenon.

While the research is ongoing, preliminary findings highlight the exacerbating effect of securitization mechanisms on regional tensions. This emphasizes the need for a shift towards desecuritization to achieve sustainable transboundary water governance. Initial case analyses suggest that diplomatic efforts and collaborative projects have the potential to serve as desecuritization strategies. These strategies offer hope for enhanced cooperation and stability in the region. This article contributes to the academic discourse on water diplomacy by providing a nuanced analysis of desecuritization efforts in Central Asia. Scholars, policymakers, and water resource managers can benefit from the insights into alternative approaches for managing transnational water conflicts and ensuring regional stability. As the region grapples with the intersection of geopolitics and water resources, this article serves as a concise yet impactful addition to ongoing discussions surrounding water security in Central Asia.

In conclusion, addressing water tensions in Central Asia requires a collective effort to promote desecuritization, foster dialogue, encourage cooperation, and ensure equitable resource allocation for the benefit of all stakeholders in the region.

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