

“Beyond State Diplomacy: The Role Of Non-State Actors In Shaping Transboundary Water Governance In The Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna Basin”

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Abstract

State-to-state negotiations have overwhelmingly dominated the conventional understanding of transboundary water politics in South Asia. Such an approach often obscures critical questions of fairness. While traditional hydro-political scholarship has largely focused on interstate power asymmetries and formal diplomatic negotiations, this research demonstrates that NSAs contribute crucially to what might be termed “hydro-diplomacy”.

Using discourse analysis of regional media, NGO publications, and parliamentary debates, alongside five case studies, the study explores how NSAs influence treaty implementation and reinterpretation. Findings show that civil society groups, research institutes, grassroots organizations, and the media generate alternative hydrological data, mobilize communities, contest hydro-hegemony, and foster Track II dialogues. Cases such as BAPA's monitoring of the Ganges Treaty, resistance to the Tipaimukh Dam, and the Brahmaputra Dialogue illustrate how NSAs act as watchdogs, advocates, and informal diplomats. Conceptualized as “hydropolitical counterweights,” their interventions broaden water governance from narrow allocations to concerns of fairness, ecology, and accountability. Institutionalizing NSA engagement is essential for more transparent and resilient transboundary water governance in South Asia.

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I. Introduction

Water diplomacy in South Asia remains shaped by interstate treaties such as the 1996 Ganges Water Sharing Treaty and ongoing negotiations on the Teesta. While those agreements symbolize a diplomatic breakthrough, they often mask deep asymmetries in access, participation, and benefit distribution. The GBM basin sustains millions across Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and China. Historically, water sharing agreements such as the Ganges Water are drafted, signed, and monitored largely by government actors, with little transparency or citizen engagement. This raises persistent questions: whose voices count in hydro-politics, who benefits from treaties, and who remains vulnerable?

Due to the prevailing asymmetrical relationship with India, Bangladesh lacks the political and economic power to force India to provide its rightful share of water. In most cases, India often influences the negotiation process in its favor. India's upstream operations with technologically advanced barrages have reduced Bangladesh's share to one-third of the 4,500 cusecs (cubic feet per second) that historical water flow data indicates should not be below that much. For this asymmetric politics, Bangladesh has continuously been deprived from getting water from the Ganga, Brahmaputra, Koshiyara, the Muhuri and Teesta. Several experts, even from India opposed building those dams and shared their concerns about the effects on ecological, agricultural and livelihood for both countries, but it was not taken seriously by their Govt. Farakka dam over the Ganga has consequences drying up several rivers that are located in the Padma basin due to the withdrawal of continuous water. (Elihi, 2012).

Bangladesh has taken diplomatic actions through bilateral discussions to mitigate the challenges of equitable water sharing and finalize the Teesta river treaty but those were unsuccessful. In recent years, water governance is not confined to the government. Diplomacy and its extension to other actors who are playing active role to raise the public opinion and influence the water governance. For example, non-state actors (NSA), including civil society organizations, research institutes, legal advocates, media outlets, and grassroots organizations, have challenged this imbalance. By generating independent hydrological data, mobilizing communities, engaging in litigation, and amplifying narratives of rights and justice, they bring alternative frames into the water diplomacy. Their interventions shift the decisions from narrow volumetric allocation to broader concerns of equity, accountability, and ecological sustainability.

This paper aims to document and analyze how non-state actors shape both implementation and reinterpretation of transboundary treaties in the GBM basin, drawing on rich case materials and insights from prominent regional newspapers whose reporting has become a vehicle for shaping policy discourse.

II. Conceptual Framework

This paper is grounded in the theory of hydro-hegemony (Zaitoun and Warner, 2006), by introducing the concept of “Hydropolitical Counterweights. Whereas hydro-hegemony explains how dominant riparian states exert control over shared water resources, the counterweight approach highlights how non-state actors (NSAs) create balancing pressures through watchdog functions, epistemic authority, advocacy networks, and Track II diplomacy. While Hydro-hegemony accounts for interstate asymmetries, it overlooks the agency of non-state actors. This paper broadens the analytical lens by integrating concepts from political ecology and transboundary water governance that recognize multi-actor influence.

Typologies of NSAs include:

- Advocacy NGOs (e.g. BAPA, SANDRP, CCDD)
- Epistemic Communities (e.g. BUET, IWM, NWCF)
- Media (e.g. The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, Anandabazar Patrika)
- Local User Associations (e.g. Waterkeeper Alliance Bangladesh)

Mechanisms of influence include agenda-setting, expert knowledge production, public mobilization, treaty monitoring, and discourse framing. These processes contribute to both formal and informal reinterpretations of transboundary agreements. The narratives have been identified through discourse analysis of the newspaper reporting, NGO publications, and parliamentary debates. This study builds narratives based on five case studies in the GBM basin and identifies three key counterweight mechanisms:

- Epistemic Counterweights- based on independent hydrological data and knowledge
- Advocacy Counterweights- mobilization of grassroots and transnational networks
- Discursive Counterweights – narratives in media and parliamentary debates

This conceptual framework contributes to the broader literature on transboundary water governance and adds a South Asian perspective to debates on polycentric and multi-actor governance (Conca, 2016; Hirsch, 2016).

III. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, multiple-case study design to examine the influence and roles of non-state actors in transboundary water governance. The qualitative approach is more suitable for a deep dive into this complex social, political, and discursive process, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative surveys and data analysis. All documents were systematically imported into the MAXQDA to develop the Code and Sub-Codes. All the codes were developed inductively through thematic analysis, focusing on mechanisms of NSA influence such as data production, advocacy, mobilization, and discourse framing.

Case Selection

After reviewing the secondary data, this study has purposively selected five case stories that reflect diverse NSA engagements across the GBM basin. All the cases were purposefully selected and designed to represent diversity in actor types, mechanisms, and outcomes across the GBM basin. While the reliance on secondary sources poses limitations, triangulation across NGOs, newspapers, and government reports strengthens validity. The following are the selection criteria included:

- Major relevant treaties (e.g. Ganges treaty, Teesta treaty)
- Involvement of distinct NSA types (e.g. NGOs, media, legal networks)
- Availability of secondary data and research
- Potential to illustrate varied mechanisms of influence (e.g. data production, public mobilization)

Data Sources:

The research draws upon a range of documentary and media sources, including:

- 42 NGO reports and publications (e.g. SANDRP, BAPA, BUP)
- 58 Investigative journalism and editorials from regional newspapers (*The Daily Star*, *Prothom Alo*, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*)
- 12 Parliamentary debates and official government documents
- 44 Grey literature such as conference proceedings, policy briefs, and Track II dialogue reports

Data Collection and Analysis

This study applied to a secondary data analysis method where documents were gathered from NGO reports, investigated journals and newspapers, and the government. official documents, policy briefs, Track II dialogue reports, and online content. All data were imported into NVivo 12 for systematic coding and analysis. Data has been analyzed through –

- **Thematic Analysis** – where codes were developed inductively to identify patterns in how NSAs influence treaties through advocacy strategies and their technical data challenge and instance treaty reinterpretation.
- **Discourse Analysis** – examined how the NSA and media construct narratives around water sharing, human rights, hydro-hegemony, and ecological justice.

IV. Data Analysis And Narratives

Narrative 1: Hydrological Injustice:

The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty of 1996 promised equitable water sharing during dry months. But the reality is totally different, where Bangladesh has often received less water than stipulated, particularly at the Hardinge Bridge during March and April. These gaps have created the hydrological injustice narrative, amplified by civil society.

Case Story: Bangladesh Proibesh Andolon (BAPA), a civic movement established in 2000 to protect Bangladesh's environment through a nationwide, united front has emerged as a key actor after signing the Ganges water sharing treaty. During the several dry seasons, BAPA conducted independent hydrological measurements, which revealed shortfalls of upstream release from India. Already, BAPA has published a report in Prothom Alo¹ and The Daily Star². Farmers of Rajshahi and Chapainawabganj describe their challenges of barren fields and scarcity of drinking water due to the violation of their river rights. These findings were cited in parliamentary debates and pressured the Joint Rivers Commission to acknowledge discrepancies. While no amendment followed, BAPA reframed water allocation as a fairness issue, rather than a technical matter.

Why This Matters:

- **Access:** Exposes inequities in water flows for the GBM basin.
- **Knowledge:** Independent monitoring challenges state monopolies.
- **Accountability:** Amplifies community testimonies to demand transparency in the national treaties.

Beyond the data collection, their advocacy led the Bangladesh Joint River Commission (JRC) to initiate technical discussions on flow discrepancies, though no formal treaty followed.

Impact: BAPA's evidence-based advocacy strengthened the public demands for transparency in treaty implementation. Their work also laid the groundwork for civil society participation in transboundary government debates.

Narrative 2: Grassroots Mobilizations

Grassroots mobilization reframes hydro-politics from a bottom-up approach. Community organizations and alliances mobilize the narratives of fairness through protest, petitions, and campaigns. The South Asia Network on Dams, River and People (SANDRP), an organization that works on issues related to water resource development in South Asia, launched a decade-long advocacy campaign opposing India's proposed Tipaimukh Hydroelectric Project in Manipur³.

SANDRP reported - The protest against large hydropower dams in Arunachal Pradesh had reached a new milestone as the stoppage of construction work of the Lower Suabansiri hydropower project was completed two years on 16th December 2013. This stoppage of the construction work of the Lower Subansiri project has brought the issue of downstream impacts of large dams to the forefront and shown how a mass movement can question a top-down development project. These protests were led by Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), All Assam Student Union (AASU), Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba-Chatra Parishad(AJYCP), along with several other organizations.⁴ Their efforts combined technical hydrological analysis with human rights narratives, arguing that the dam would:

- Disrupt downstream hydrology critical to Bangladesh's Shurma-Kushiara basin

¹ <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/ztlyycvqfr>

² <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/focus/news/bangladesh-needs-put-forward-the-transit-exchange-rivers-formula-the-framework-indo-bangladesh-3264146>

³ <https://sandrp.in/tag/tipaimukh-dam/>

⁴ <https://sandrp.in/tag/tipaimukh-dam/>

- Threaten indigenous communities' livelihoods and cultural heritage
- Increase seismic risk in a technology-sensitive zone

Case Story: The campaign conducted by SANDRP against the Tipaimukh Dam and Citizens' concern for Dams and Development mobilized indigenous communities in Manipur and Bangladesh⁵. Testimonies that were collected during the local hearings revealed anticipated impacts on farming and fishing, later amplified by Prothom Alo and Daily Star⁶. The Tipaimukh Dam project sparked resistance across India and Bangladesh, as civil society groups warned of severe ecological and livelihood consequences downstream. Bangladeshi groups, including BAPA and Waterkeeper Alliance, collaborated with Indian organizations such as Citizens' Concern for Dams and Development, raising concerns over ecological disruption and socio-economic impacts. This mobilization contributed to the prolonged delay of project clearance, illustrating how non-state actors can alter the trajectory of water diplomacy (SANDRP, 2011).

Impact: The campaign shifted Tipaimukh from a bilateral matter to a region-wide controversy. It catalyzed parliamentary debates in Dhaka, with Bangladeshi's MPs⁷. Although the issue remains unsolved, SANDRO's efforts exemplify how technical experts transform political leverage.

Narrative 3: Regional Resistance

Provincial politics have shaped the water diplomacy, particularly in Indian politics. Their narratives always focus on their own province's fairness and local livelihoods. Ananda Bazar Patrika has documented extensive resistance to the proposed Teesta Water Sharing Treaty within West Bengal. They argued that in the dry season, water scarcity in North Bengal would worsen if water were shared with Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, Jatiyatabadi Ainjibi Forum, Jhenidah district unit protests the Indian move to construct Tipaimukh Dam on Barak River⁸, arguing that

- Not only affect the agriculture in large areas of Bangladesh, but it also brings about harmful ecological, climatic, and environmental changes in both countries. Central government negotiations often disregard regional ecological realities.
- A dam would cause a major disaster in Bangladesh.

In recent months, the "Jago Bahe, Teesta Banchai" movement, held on October 16, 2025⁹, brought together over 100,000 people along 11 locations of the Teesta River in Lalmonirhat. It was led by Principal Asadul Habib Dulu, the Lalmonirhat District BNP President and coordinator of the movement, who issued an ultimatum for immediate action on the Teesta Mega Project. The movement also saw strong support from Nazrul Islam Haqqani, President of the Teesta Banchao Nodi Banchai Sangram Parishad, symbolizing unity among local activists. Through a torch-lit vigil at 6:30 p.m., participants demanded that the government start the project with domestic funding before the national election schedule. This historic demonstration marked a turning point in the regional struggle for water justice, highlighting the people's determination to save their river and livelihoods.

Ananda Bazar Patrika, a reputed daily newspaper in west-bengal, India reported how local protests, petitions, and public statements by West Bengal politicians created significant political obstacles. At times, non-state actors from West Bengal even engaged with Bangladeshi CSOs in Track II dialogues, fostering mutual understanding but also revealing deep domestic fault lines in India's federal system.

Impact: The resistance delayed the formalization of the Teesta treaty for over a decade. It highlighted how subnational actors can exert veto power over international water agreements. Ananda Bazar Patrika's coverage contributed to framing Teesta as a regional livelihood issue, not merely a diplomatic negotiation.

Narrative 4: Brahmaputra Dialogue

⁵ <https://sandrp.in/2016/12/02/citizens-concern-for-dams-and-development-the-voice-of-vulnerable-honored-with-bhagirath-prayas-samman-at-india-rivers-week-2016/#more-18595>

⁶ <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-213870>

⁷ <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/water-minister-welcomes-tipai-debate>

⁸ <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-97456>

⁹ <https://www.jagonews24.com/en/national/news/86433>

From 2012 to 2018, the Brahmaputra Dialogue—facilitated by NGOs such as SaciWATERS¹⁰ and partner organizations created an informal platform for technical experts, civil society groups, and journalists from India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China. These platforms proposed cooperative measures, such as joint flood forecasting and ecological flow standards, some of which informed subsequent bilateral negotiations. Participants:

- Shared hydrological data models and flood forecasting systems
- Discussed cooperative management of sediment loads and biodiversity
- Proposed mechanisms for real-time data sharing

Case Story: Between 2013 and 2014, bilateral BD meetings between India and Bangladesh frequently raised the need to include China in water dialogues, though many doubted China’s willingness to participate openly. In 2015, with support from ICIMOD, SaciWATERS successfully invited representatives from Yunnan University, elevating the BD platform to a multilateral dialogue involving India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China. At the first regional meeting in Bangladesh, Chinese participants actively shared views on hydropower diplomacy and stressed the importance of communicating such discussions to governments. They expressed interest in hosting a workshop in China, citing the Mekong River experience, where China initiated data sharing in 2004 to support downstream countries. In May 2017, amid the Doklam standoff, BD representatives visited China, where Chinese academics responded professionally and showed openness to dialogue, despite the tense geopolitics (Barua, 2020).

This dialogue influenced policy conversations, as evidenced by subsequent Track I engagements, including a Memorandum of Understanding between India and China on hydrological data sharing during flood seasons.

Why This Matters:

- Fair Dialogue: Opens space for multiple actors.
- Fair Innovation: Generates cooperative technical solutions.
- Fair Futures: Builds trust and lays groundwork for formal diplomacy.

Impact: The dialogue contributed to reducing distrust, creating technical consensus on shared challenges, and building relationships that continue to inform diplomatic negotiations.

Narrative 5: Media as Actor and Agenda-Setter

The media always play a critical role as a watchdog and amplifier of both accurate and inaccurate information. It mobilizes public opinion and can shape diplomatic agendas.

Case Story: *The Daily Star*’s 2021 investigative series “Drying Rivers of Bangladesh” examined falling river flows linked to upstream dams. The series:

- Publish data from unequal water sharing that builds up public opinion.
- Highlighted human stories of farmers losing crops and fishermen abandoning traditional livelihoods
- Called for treaty reviews and greater ecological protection

Similarly, *Prothom Alo*’s coverage of the Farakka Barrage regularly features community testimonies and hydrological analysis, directly informing parliamentary debates. *Ananda Bazar Patrika* has become a platform for contesting New Delhi’s centralized water diplomacy, often amplifying regional voices. On the other hand, the series of reports published by the *Prothom Alo* and the *Daily Star*¹¹ about the sudden floods of Teesta Basin due to India reportedly opening all floodgates at the Gajaldoba barrage. All those reports resulted in massive protest movements for the Teesta River¹² in February 2025.

However, the media’s power is dual-edged. In July 2024, a rumor spread on social media, amplified by online portals, claiming India had secretly opened the gates of the Dumboor Hydroelectric Plant in Tripura. Though debunked, the panic prompted an official diplomatic protest and new discussions on emergency communication protocols¹³.

¹⁰ <https://dialogue.earth/en/water/talking-with-the-chinese-on-the-brahmaputra/>

¹¹ <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/editorial/news/teesta-flooding-should-be-wake-call-3404361?amp>

¹² <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/local-news/80lnhluyc>

¹³ <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/local-news/7h3dl74c0z>

Why This Matters:

- Fair Accountability: Investigative journalism exposes treaty failures.
- Fair Awareness: Media narratives shape public opinion.
- Fair Risks: Misinformation can inflame diplomatic tensions.

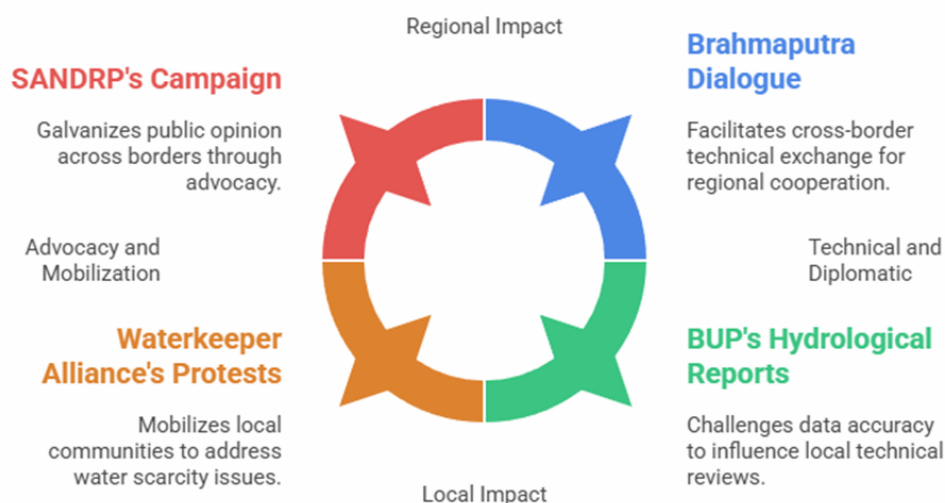
Impact: The media is both watchdog and potential amplifier of misinformation. Its reporting shapes public opinion, influences policy debates, and in some cases, sparks diplomatic friction.

V. Discussions

Building on the evidence analyzed by this study through the case stories and thematic analysis, it becomes clear that non-state actors are reshaping the contours of water diplomacy in South Asia. Through a combination of technical legitimacy, right-based discourse, media influence, and grassroots mobilizations, NSA serves as an indispensable intermediary between the state-level treaty process and local realities. Their efforts highlight a critical gap between formal state commitments and ground-level hydrological and social outcomes.

Considering this context, the concept of “Hydropolitical Counterweights” becomes useful. NSA challenges state dominance in water negotiations by acting as epistemic watchdogs, community advocates, and diplomatic facilitators. Those actors play an important role within the state to mobilize the laws and public sentiment to reinterpret existing treaties and influence the existing government diplomacy.

Strategies and Framing in Transboundary Water Treaty Influence



The following section outlines recent developments (2023–2025) that further illustrate how NSA-led interventions continue to evolve and shape water governance debates in the GBM basin.

Impact on Treaty Reinterpretation

Specific examples from the findings underscore how NSAs contribute to treaty reinterpretation. The Tipaimukh Dam campaign, led by SANDRP and Citizens' Concern for Dams and Development (CCDD), exemplifies how technical evidence and local testimonies can shift both domestic and regional perceptions, delaying infrastructural projects despite official bilateral support.

Similarly, BAPA's hydrological monitoring of the Ganges Treaty has ensured that violations do not remain hidden, even though formal treaty amendments remain elusive. By producing alternative data, BAPA forces governments to acknowledge discrepancies, thereby turning treaties into “living documents” subject to ongoing scrutiny and reinterpretation.

On the other hand, the reports published in Anada Bazar Patrika, Prothom Alo and Daily Star organized public opinion to reinterpret the diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Regional Variations and Subnational Dynamics

While most of the NSA interventions of the GBM are concentrated in Bangladesh–India relations, similar dynamics are observable elsewhere. For example, in Nepal, community organizations have mobilized against large hydropower projects along the Koshi and Arun rivers, emphasizing downstream ecological risks (Hirsch, 2016). In the Mekong basin, Track II dialogues supported by civil society have influenced China's gradual willingness to share hydrological data (Hirsch, 2016). These comparative insights suggest that NSAs can exert influence even in contexts where formal state power is dominant, though their effectiveness is shaped by national political opportunity structures and levels of securitization. Here, state-level civil society organizations and regional politicians have successfully obstructed treaty finalization, demonstrating that transboundary water diplomacy is not merely intergovernmental but deeply intertwined with domestic federal politics.

Key Pathways to Influence

A core contribution of this research is identifying the diverse pathways through which the NSA shapes treaty dynamics. For example,

- NGOs such as SANDRP and BAPA produce independent hydrological data, which empowers local stakeholders and enables them to compare with the government. official data.
- Grassroots organizations like Waterkeeper Alliance Bangladesh engage affected communities, transforming abstract treaty clauses into tangible livelihood issues.
- Informal dialogues, such as Brahmaputra Dialogue, illustrate how NSAs create cross-border channels for technical cooperation and trust building, supplementing often rigid formal negotiations.
- Media plays an active role as watchdog and elevates the discourse around water sharing to national prominence, which directly influences policy actors.

These pathways collectively illustrate a complex ecosystem in which NSAs not only contest hydro-hegemonic practice but also governance gaps, provide technical legitimacy, and propose innovative solutions.

Policy and Scholarly Implications

These findings carry significant implications for both policy and academic scholarship:

• Policy Implications:

- States must recognize NSAs as legitimate stakeholders rather than peripheral agitators.
- Institutionalizing civil society participation in bodies like the Joint Rivers Commission could enhance transparency and trust.
- International donors and multilateral agencies should support capacity-building initiatives for NSAs to engage more effectively in technical and policy dialogues.

• Academic Implications:

- Future hydro-political studies should systematically integrate analyses of NSA influence rather than treating them as marginal actors.
- Further research is warranted into the conditions under which NSA interventions succeed or fail, particularly in highly securitized contexts.

VI. Conclusion

This research establishes that the NSA plays a vital yet often underacknowledged role in shaping the implementation and reinterpretation of transboundary water treaties in the GBM basin. Through independent research, public mobilization, legal advocacy, and informal diplomacy, NSAs increasingly contest state-led narratives and demand more inclusive, transparent, and adaptive treaty frameworks.

This research reinforces the argument that hydro-diplomacy in South Asia is no longer the exclusive domain of governments. As environmental changes, regionalism, and democratic accountability converge, NSAs serve as essential interlocutors between policy frameworks and affected communities.

To strengthen the future water governance in GBM basin, it is imperative to institutionalize the NSA engagement, reform the outdated treaty mechanism, and embrace participatory, science-informed decision-making processes. Without these shifts, treaty-based cooperation risks becoming obsolete amidst mounting hydrological and political volatility.

VII. Policy Recommendations

The findings demonstrate that NSAs can play crucial roles in shaping hydro-diplomacy, yet their institutionalization faces political and structural constraints. Recommendations must therefore balance normative aspirations with pragmatic feasibility. Inclusion of NSAs in state diplomacy, like the Joint Rivers Commission, could enhance transparency. States may resist formalization due to sovereignty concerns. To foster more inclusive and sustainable transboundary water governance in the GBM basin, this paper offers the following policy recommendations:

- **Formalize Civil Society Participation:** Institutionalize NGO representation in national water commissions and Joint Rivers Commission meetings through observer roles or advisory panels.
- **Support Epistemic Collaboration:** Promote partnerships between state hydrological agencies and independent research institutions. Fund training programmes for CSOs in data analysis and transboundary water law.
- **Strengthen Community-Based Monitoring:** Scale up grassroots hydrological monitoring initiatives to ensure accountability in flow measurements and treaty compliance.
- **Expand Track II Diplomacy:** Increase support for informal platforms such as the Brahmaputra Dialogue. Facilitate structured dialogues among academic experts, civil society actors, and subnational policymakers.
- **Enhance Media Engagement:** Encourage ethical journalism and investigative reporting on river governance. Provide capacity-building for journalists to critically report on water policy issues.
- **Mitigate Risks of Misinformation:** Develop joint cross-border communication protocols to verify and manage emergency-related water release information, especially during floods and droughts.

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