THE QOSH TEPA CANAL AND THE INSTITUTIONAL VACUUM: SCENARIOS FOR CONFIDENCE-BUILDING BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN RIPARIAN STATES, 2026–2030

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Abstract

The Qosh Tepa Canal, under construction in northern Afghanistan since 2022, represents the most significant unilateral change to the water balance of the Amu Darya basin since the Soviet-era expansion of irrigation that precipitated the desiccation of the Aral Sea. Published estimates of the canal's diversion capacity vary widely, but the upper range would more than double Afghan withdrawal from the river and would reduce availability substantially for downstream Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Afghanistan, however, stands outside the institutional architecture of the basin. It is not a party to the regional agreements of 1992 and 1993, nor to the 1997 United Nations Watercourses Convention or the 1992 Helsinki Convention, and the absence of broad diplomatic recognition of the government in Kabul rules out treaty-based solutions in the medium term. This article analyses the resulting institutional vacuum along four dimensions: legal, informational, verificational and diplomatic. It then assesses the semi-official engagement formats that have emerged since 2024 and develops three scenarios for the period 2026 - 2030, each defined by specific triggers and observable indicators. The article concludes with a phased roadmap of confidence-building measures organised along informational, verificational and restraining dimensions. Its central practical claim is that the window for establishing agreed procedures before the canal is fully commissioned is limited to roughly two to three years, after which downstream states will confront an operational diversion facility as an accomplished fact.

Keywords: Qosh Tepa Canal; Amu Darya; Afghanistan; confidence-building measures; water security; Central Asia; scenario analysis

Highlights

- Afghanistan's largest hydraulic project is proceeding entirely outside the basin's institutional architecture.
- The institutional vacuum is analysed along legal, informational, verificational and diplomatic dimensions.
- Three scenarios for 2026 - 2030 are specified through triggers and observable indicators.
- A phased roadmap moves from informational to verificational to restraining measures.
- The window for agreeing procedures before full commissioning is approximately two to three years.

1. Introduction

In early 2022, within months of taking power, the Taliban government began construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal. The scheme is designed to divert water from the Amu Darya into the northern provinces of Balkh, Jowzjan and Faryab. Reported design parameters give a length of approximately 285 kilometres, a width of about 100 metres and a

depth of about 8.5 metres, with an intended command area in the region of 550,000 hectares and a total cost estimated at 684 million United States dollars (Jamestown Foundation, 2025). It is the largest hydraulic undertaking in Afghanistan's modern history. The first phase was reported complete in October 2023; the second phase was reported at 93 per cent completion by August 2025; full commissioning, including a third phase and associated infrastructure, is projected for 2028 (The Times of Central Asia, 2025a; Crosslin, 2025).

The potential effect on the basin's water balance is substantial, although the published estimates diverge considerably (see Table 1). Assessments of diversion range from roughly 17 per cent of Amu Darya flow (Crosslin, 2025) to 20 - 30 per cent in several policy analyses (Euronews, 2025; Jamestown Foundation, 2025; The Times of Central Asia, 2025), with figures of up to 10 cubic kilometres a year appearing in the wider literature (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025). Regional water information sources project that Afghan consumption could rise from a current level of some 3 - 5 cubic kilometres a year to

9 - 11 cubic kilometres on completion (CAWater-Info). For downstream states the implications are serious. Reported estimates suggest a reduction of the order of 15 per cent in water availability for Uzbekistan, and considerably larger reductions for Turkmenistan, where agriculture accounts for the overwhelming share of national water use (Jamestown Foundation, 2025).

What distinguishes the Qosh Tepa case from earlier water disputes in the basin is not the scale of the diversion but the absence of any mechanism for managing it. Afghanistan is not party to any regional water agreement. No prior notification was given to downstream states. No joint environmental or hydrological assessment has been conducted. No coordination mechanism exists. This article analyses that vacuum and asks what can be done within it.

The article makes three contributions. First, it disaggregates the institutional vacuum into four distinct dimensions, showing that they are not equally intractable and that the informational dimension is more tractable than the legal one. Second, it develops three explicit scenarios for the period to 2030, each specified through triggers and observable indicators rather than through general expectations, so that the analysis can be tested against events. Third, it proposes a phased roadmap of confidence-building measures designed to operate without requiring formal recognition of the government in Kabul. The analysis applies the conceptual framework developed in a companion article, which sets out the transfer of confidence-building measures from arms control to water governance.

2. Data and Method

The analysis draws on four categories of source: published estimates and technical assessments of the canal, including satellite-based monitoring studies; documents and materials of the regional water institutions; reporting on the engagement formats that have emerged since 2024; and the secondary policy literature on Afghanistan's regional relations. Where estimates conflict, the range is reported rather than a single figure, and the source of the divergence is identified.

The scenario method is used deliberately rather than forecasting. The Afghan political context is volatile, and the assignment of probabilities to political trajectories in such conditions would give an unwarranted impression of precision. Scenarios are therefore constructed as internally coherent trajectories, each defined by triggering events and by observable indicators that can be monitored in real time. The purpose is diagnostic: to allow analysts and policymakers to identify, at an early stage, which trajectory is materialising. This approach follows established practice in policy analysis under deep uncertainty, where the value of scenarios lies in preparing responses rather than in prediction.

Two limitations should be stated at the outset. First, information on the canal is incomplete by the nature of the case, and several key parameters, including the design capacity of the intake structure, are not publicly available in verified form. Second, the assessment of engagement formats relies substantially on reporting rather than on primary documentation, since the proceedings of several formats are not published. Both limitations are themselves evidence for the article's central argument about the informational dimension of the vacuum.

Table 1. Published estimates of Qosh Tepa diversion and downstream effect

Source	Estimate	Basis and caveats
Crosslin (2025)	Approximately 17 per cent of Amu Darya flow	Geospatial timeline based on satellite imagery; design capacity inferred, not disclosed
Jamestown Foundation (2025); Euronews (2025); The Times of Central Asia (2025b)	20–30 per cent of flow	Policy analyses drawing on regional expert assessments
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2025)	Up to 10 km³ per year	Order-of-magnitude estimate for completed scheme
CAWater-Info (n.d.)	Rise from 3–5 km³ to 9–11 km³ per year	Regional water information platform; assumes full commissioning
Jamestown Foundation (2025)	Reduction of approximately 15 per cent for Uzbekistan; substantially greater for Turkmenistan	Downstream effect estimates; sensitive to assumptions on canal efficiency and losses

3. The Institutional Vacuum: Four Dimensions

3.1. The legal dimension

Afghanistan is not a party to the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, nor to the 1997 Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. Participation is uneven even among the five post-Soviet states: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are parties to the 1997 Convention, whereas Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, both predominantly upstream states, have not acceded (UNECE, n.d.; Ziganshina, 2014).

The only bilateral instrument ever concluded on the matter is the Soviet–Afghan agreement of 1946, which recognised an Afghan entitlement of 9 cubic kilometres a year. If the higher estimates of the canal's capacity prove accurate, projected Afghan consumption would approach or exceed that figure. This raises an unresolved question that has never been addressed by the parties: does the 1946 agreement remain operative, has it been tacitly superseded, or does Afghanistan regard its entitlement as governed by customary principles alone? Under customary international water law, every riparian state is entitled to equitable and reasonable utilisation and is bound by the obligation not to cause significant harm. Yet

the operative content of equitable utilisation in the Amu Darya basin has never been negotiated, and there is therefore no agreed benchmark against which the canal could be assessed.

3.2. The informational dimension

The Afghan side does not provide systematic, verifiable information on construction progress, planned withdrawal volumes or the engineering characteristics of the intake structure (The Times of Central Asia, 2025). The wide spread of published estimates documented in Table 1 is not merely a reflection of engineering uncertainty in an unfinished project. It is a direct consequence of the absence of any disclosure mechanism. Observers are obliged to infer from imagery what would elsewhere be reported through routine notification. This is a textbook deficit in informational confidence-building measures, and it is the dimension on which progress is most feasible in the short term.

3.3. The verificational dimension

There is no joint monitoring of construction. The breach of the canal embankment in December 2023, which created an artificial lake reported at between 10 and more than 30 square kilometres, was confirmed through satellite observation by independent research groups rather than through any official channel (Crosslin, 2025; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025). Afghan authorities did not publicly acknowledge the incident. Independent Afghan media and civil-society organisations have published investigative material on engineering quality and salinisation risk (Amu TV, 2024; AWEC, 2024), but this material is disconnected from any interstate verification mechanism. Satellite monitoring currently substitutes for verification, but it is an imperfect substitute: it establishes what exists, not what is intended, and it produces information about a party rather than with a party.

3.4. The diplomatic dimension

As of mid-2026, the Russian Federation remains the only state to have extended formal diplomatic recognition to the Taliban government (IISS, 2025; The Diplomat, 2026). The Central Asian states have adopted a pragmatic approach, engaging practically on specific matters while withholding formal recognition (SpecialEurasia, 2026). This position is coherent, but it has a direct consequence for water governance: it forecloses the conclusion of legally binding treaties in the medium term and therefore places a premium on instruments that do not require recognition in order to function.

Taken together, the four dimensions are not equally rigid. The legal and diplomatic dimensions depend on decisions that regional states do not control and are unlikely to shift before 2030. The informational and verificational dimensions, by contrast, can move through technical channels and voluntary steps. This asymmetry is the foundation of the roadmap proposed in Section 6.

4. Emerging Engagement Formats

Despite the vacuum, the period from 2024 onwards has seen the emergence of several engagement formats, summarised in Table 2. The Termez Dialogue provides a political and diplomatic space bringing together Afghanistan and the Central Asian states in a regular format modelled on established regional consultative mechanisms; its second round took place in Tashkent in June 2026 (The Diplomat, 2026). An Afghanistan–Central Asia consultative dialogue was held in Kabul in April 2026 (SpecialEurasia, 2026), followed by a think tank forum in June of the same year (The Diplomat, 2026). Tashkent International Water Week, held in March 2026, brought together a large international participation and included an Afghan delegation led at deputy-ministerial level (The Times of Central Asia, 2026).

Table 2. Engagement formats involving Afghanistan and Central Asian states, 2024–2026

Format	Track	Status	Water-related content
Termez Dialogue	Track 1 / 1.5	Second round, Tashkent, June 2026	General regional agenda; no dedicated standing water working group
Afghanistan - Central Asia Consultative Dialogue	Track 1.5	First held, Kabul, April 2026	Declaratory; no technical output reported
Afghanistan - Central Asia Think Tank Forum	Track 2	Held, Kabul, June 2026	Expert exchange; potential entry point for technical cooperation
Tashkent International Water Week	Track 1.5 / 2	Held, March 2026	Afghan delegation at deputy-ministerial level; sectoral content

These formats share three features. They are episodic rather than standing. They are semi-official, which is an advantage in conditions of non-recognition but a limitation in terms of commitment. And they have so far generated declaratory rather than technical output. They do not yet constitute a stable system of engagement comparable in institutional depth to the ICWC or IFAS.

This assessment should not be read as dismissal. In the procedural understanding of confidence building, the creation of regular channels is itself the first stage, and those channels did not exist three years ago. Statements made within these formats have included recognition by Uzbekistan of Afghanistan's entitlement to a share of the basin's water, and statements from Kabul about developing relations on a legal basis and in accordance with the legitimate rights of regional states (The Times of Central Asia, 2026). The analytical point is that these are preconditions for confidence-building measures rather than measures in themselves. The transition from dialogue to confidence building occurs at the moment when a format produces its first verifiable, regularly updated output.

5. Scenario Analysis, 2026 - 2030

Three scenarios are distinguished, summarised in Table 3. Each is specified through triggers, indicators and an expected state of affairs by the end of the period.

5.1. Scenario 1: cooperative consolidation

In this trajectory, a subsequent round of the Termez Dialogue establishes a dedicated water agenda; Afghanistan accepts technical assistance directed at canal efficiency, which is presented as serving Afghan interests in reducing losses; and the regional scientific-information institutions launch a standing satellite monitoring product. Observable indicators would include the publication of at least one set of technical parameters for the canal and the establishment of a standing working group on water. The expected outcome by 2028 - 2030 is not a treaty but a set of functioning arrangements providing minimum predictability.

5.2. Scenario 2: inertial continuation

In this trajectory there are no triggering events, and current fragmentary contacts continue. Observable indicators would include the continuation of dialogue formats without water-related output and the absence of any new disclosure. The expected outcome is that the canal is commissioned around 2028 under conditions substantially similar to those of

today: no verifiable withdrawal data, no agreed procedures for responding to disputes, and downstream planning conducted on the basis of inference from imagery. This scenario requires no deterioration in relations. It is the default trajectory.

5.3. Scenario 3: escalation

In this trajectory, a revealed unilateral surge in withdrawal beyond the projected range, a major technical failure at the canal, or a wider regional political crisis spills over into water relations. Observable indicators would include the cessation of dialogue formats and a sharp shift in the rhetoric of downstream states. The expected outcome is the use of economic or diplomatic pressure, with consequent risks to regional stability given the fragility of the security situation along parts of the Afghan northern border. The Indus experience of 2025 is instructive here: suspension of cooperation can occur rapidly and for reasons originating outside the water sector.

Table 3. Scenarios for confidence-building in the Amu Darya basin, 2026 - 2030

Scenario	Triggers	Observable indicators	Expected state by 2030
1. Cooperative consolidation	Dedicated water agenda at a further Termez round; acceptance of technical assistance; launch of regional satellite monitoring product	Publication of canal parameters; standing water working group established	Functioning arrangements providing minimum predictability, without a formal treaty
2. Inertial continuation	None; continuation of current fragmentary contacts	Formats meet without water-related output; no new disclosure	Canal commissioned under present conditions; no verifiable data, no agreed procedures
3. Escalation	Revealed withdrawal beyond projected range; major technical failure; wider regional crisis	Dialogue formats cease; sharp rhetorical shift by downstream states	Economic or diplomatic pressure; heightened risk to regional stability

Probabilities are not assigned, for the reasons set out in Section 2. The analytical function of the scenario set is different: it identifies a small number of indicators whose movement can be monitored, and it makes the default trajectory visible. The second scenario deserves particular emphasis, because it requires no adverse event and no hostile intent. Inaction alone produces it.

6. A Phased Roadmap of Confidence-Building Measures

Drawing on the scenario analysis and on the three-dimensional model of water-related confidence-building measures, Table 4 sets out a phased roadmap. The sequence runs from informational to verificational to restraining measures, reflecting their ascending political sensitivity.

Table 4. Phased roadmap of confidence-building measures, 2026 - 2030

Timeframe	Type	Specific step	Platform	Monitoring indicator
2026–2027	Informational	Voluntary disclosure of canal parameters through a neutral platform	Regional scientific-information centre of the ICWC; CAWater-Info	Number and regularity of disclosed parameters
2026–2027	Informational	Launch of a regular satellite monitoring product for the basin	Regional scientific-information centre, with donor support	Quarterly published reports
2027–2028	Verificational	Independent engineering review of canal facilities	World Bank or UNECE modality	Review completed; Afghan participation secured
2027–2028	Verificational	Exchange of seasonal flood and drought forecasts	Bilateral technical channel	Existence of a seasonal exchange
2027–2028	Restraining	Coordination of seasonal withdrawal schedules	Trilateral technical consultations	Agreed seasonal schedule
2028–2030	Institutional	Observer or dialogue-partner status for Afghanistan in basin institutions	IFAS Executive Committee; ICWC	Formal decision adopted

The roadmap rests on three design principles. The first is sequencing: it begins with the least politically sensitive measures and progresses towards more demanding ones, on the reasoning that restraining measures presuppose a shared factual basis that only informational measures can create. The second is the use of existing platforms rather than the creation of new institutions, which avoids the negotiation of new mandates and reduces the political cost of participation. The third is recognition-neutrality: every step is designed to function in a technical register, in the same way that international organisations have continued humanitarian and technical engagement with Afghanistan without prejudging the question of recognition.

Two objections should be anticipated. The first is that voluntary disclosure gives the Afghan side no evident benefit. The response is that disclosure through a neutral regional platform can be framed as a means of correcting the inflated estimates currently circulating, which is a plausible Afghan interest. The second objection is that technical engagement risks legitimising a project undertaken without notification. This concern is real, and the roadmap addresses it through framing rather than avoidance: informational and verificational

measures can be structured as without-prejudice steps that do not affect the legal positions of the parties.

7. The Afghan Domestic Dimension

A factor often underweighted in external analysis is the domestic political function of the canal. Analyses by the United States Institute of Peace (2024) and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (2023) indicate that the project operates as an instrument of domestic legitimacy. It projects the image of a government capable of executing a major infrastructure project independently, and it consolidates administrative presence in the northern provinces. This has an important analytical implication. Kabul's approach to the canal is shaped not only by hydrological calculation but by imperatives of domestic narrative and regime consolidation. Proposals that appear to constrain the project will therefore encounter resistance that is political rather than technical in origin, whatever their engineering merit.

At the same time, internal Afghan criticism of the project's technical quality, articulated by independent media and by civil-society organisations (Amu TV, 2024; AWEC, 2024), creates a potential entry point at Track 2. Central Asian states and international partners could frame engineering review and technical assistance not as external pressure but as support for addressing concerns already raised by Afghan professionals themselves. Framing of this kind matters disproportionately in conditions where the substance of cooperation is modest but its political interpretation is contested.

8. Conclusion

The Qosh Tepa Canal marks a turning point for water governance in the Amu Darya basin. The analysis presented here suggests three conclusions. First, the institutional vacuum surrounding the project is not uniform: its legal and diplomatic dimensions are largely fixed in the medium term, whereas its informational and verificational dimensions are open to movement through technical channels. Second, the engagement formats that have emerged since 2024 are preconditions for confidence building rather than confidence-building measures in themselves, and the transition between the two occurs when a format produces its first verifiable output. Third, the default trajectory is inertial continuation, which requires no adverse event and no hostile intent.

The practical implication concerns timing. The window for establishing agreed procedures before full commissioning is limited to approximately two to three years. After the canal becomes operational, downstream states will be negotiating over an accomplished fact, and the range of available instruments will narrow accordingly.

The measures proposed here are deliberately unspectacular. They are small, technical and incremental. That is the point. Confidence in contested basins is not created by comprehensive settlements but accumulated through repetition: through regular contact, through shared data, and through keeping channels open when politics makes them difficult to maintain. For the Amu Darya, with climatic, demographic and infrastructural pressures converging over the coming decade, such accumulation is not merely desirable. Waiting for favourable conditions is not an alternative strategy, because those conditions do not arrive unassisted. They are constructed, one verifiable step at a time.

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