A European Union 'Water Diplomacy'? Frames of Water in EU External Action

Summary

In 2013, the European Union (EU) formulated its ambition to develop a 'water diplomacy'. Subsequently, it attempted to put this aspiration into practice, notably through various Council Conclusions. Despite this activity, the EU's evolution as a 'water diplomat' remains underexplored. To address this gap, this article examines the EU's understanding of 'water diplomacy' by conducting a comprehensive discourse analysis of its framing of water as an object of diplomacy and the resulting diplomatic approaches. The analysis of key EU documents, triangulated through interviews with policy-makers, reveals that several water frames currently intersect, resulting in a multi-facetted EU external water action comprising a narrow and a broad understanding of water diplomacy. Following an explanation of this finding focussing on the policy entrepreneurship of intra-EU water diplomacy stakeholders, the article concludes by discussing its implications for the academic study and political practice of water diplomacy within and beyond the EU.

Keywords

diplomacy; discourse; discourse analysis; European Union; frame; water; water diplomacy

1 Introduction

Freshwater[1] is essential to life on earth, but also an increasingly scarce resource. Only 2.5 per cent of all water on the planet is freshwater, of which two thirds are frozen in glaciers and ice caps. The remaining freshwater resources need to satisfy the growing demands of an increasing world population and its water-intensive agricultural and industrial production patterns. In addition to the natural hydrological cycle, which leads to varying water availability, it is primarily anthropogenic pressures, including human-induced climate change, that contribute to 'water scarcity'.[2] This scarcity, in turn, represents a growing challenge able to trigger intra- and interstate conflicts.[3]

The biophysical characteristics of water as a resource that is central to human livelihood on earth has, alongside additional – cultural, economic, social, even spiritual – meanings, made it an object of politics both locally and globally.[4] While domestic water policies typically focus on regulating durable access to clean water, international water law and 'water diplomacy' deal with the multiple challenges that arise from the transboundary nature of water bodies.[5] Water diplomacy remains a contested term with a 'variety of understandings'.[6] A broad definition depicts it as:[7]

> deliberative political processes and practices of preventing, mitigating, and resolving disputes over transboundary water resources and developing joint water governance

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[1] Unless otherwise indicated, the term 'water' refers to 'freshwater' in this article.
[2] Haddeland et al. 2014.
[3] Wolf 1999.
[4] Zareie, Bozorg-Haddad and Loáiciga 2021.
[5] United Nations Water 2023.
[6] Sehring et al. 2022, 200.
[7] Ibid.

arrangements by applying foreign policy means ... embedded in bi- and/or multilateral relations beyond the water sector and taking place at different ... scales.

This implies that water diplomacy can be conceptualised as the multi-level management of water issues. At the global level, it manifests as a 'strategic tool' promoting technical governance norms such as Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) or international water law usually developed in fora like UN Water. 'Water diplomats' at the global level engage in multilateral or bilateral diplomacy to promote or oppose these global water norms. In turn, regional or sub-regional diplomacy more often deals with specific water bodies or water governance in a particular region.[8]

The increasing salience of water and its multi-level governance suggest that developed regional organisations like the European Union (EU) have the potential to play a distinct role in international water affairs, since they act both as a 'layer' of governance, pooling their Member States' resources, and as self-standing 'players' engaging in water diplomacy. Since 2000, when it adopted the Water Framework Directive (WFD), a legal act protecting 'all forms of water', the EU has developed into a significant 'layer' of global water governance by becoming a comprehensive domestic water resource policy actor, notably through 'river basin management'.[9] However, aside from an earlier integration of water with development policy, the EU's ambition to become a genuine 'player' with an external engagement on water dates only from the 2010s. Its desire to become a 'water diplomat' can primarily be observed in its discourse, especially in several Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) Conclusions on EU 'water diplomacy' and 'water in EU external action'.[10]

To date, this EU 'water diplomacy' has received limited scholarly attention. The small body of literature that has developed around the issue is confined to overview pieces from a practitioner perspective[11] and case studies on the nature of EU external water engagement.[12] While these are useful contributions to an emergent research agenda on the matter, they lack comprehensive – theoretical and empirical – engagement with the EU's motivations, ambitions, objectives, and actions in the water diplomacy domain. As a result, what water diplomacy means to a regional organisation like the EU remains under-conceptualized and insufficiently empirically documented.

This article addresses this issue by focusing on a key aspect of the EU's increasing interest in water diplomacy, namely on understanding what the EU considers as 'diplomacy', classically defined as 'the conduct of relations between states and other entities with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means',[13] in the broader context of its external action on water, of which it is an instrument. By external action on water, it understands 'all activities involving EU engagement with the outside world' that pertain to water.[14] In the EU, whose meaning-making regarding water diplomacy we strive to understand, external action subsumes 'foreign policy'.[15] Against this backdrop, the article asks: *How does the EU frame water as an object of its external action? Which approaches to water diplomacy as part of its external water action follow from specific EU discursive frames?* The article starts from the assumption that a 'systematic investigation of how the definition of policy issues affects subsequent political dynamics' is essential to understanding any emerging policy

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[8] Zareie, Bozorg-Haddad and Loáiciga 2021, 2349.
[9] European Parliament and Council of the EU 2000.
[10] See Council of the EU 2013, 2018, 2019, 2021a.
[11] Marques Ruiz 2020.
[12] Adelle, Benson and Agnew 2018; Fritsch, Benson and Adelle 2020; Tomalová and Ullrichová 2021.
[13] Bull 1977, 156.
[14] Gstöhl and Schunz 2021, 2.
[15] Ibid.

field.[16] Grasping the logic of EU water diplomacy therefore initially requires apprehending how the Union interprets water as a policy problem. The resulting 'frames', i.e., 'patterns of organised information by which people make sense of the world',[17] of water constitute elements of a broader discourse, that is, 'an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorisations that are produced, reproduced and transformed… and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities'.[18] Discourses 'constitut[e] and regulat[e] the social and political world'[19] by 'provid[ing] ... the context in which individual policy articulations are set'.[20] Within this 'discursive universe',[21] policies result from an 'ongoing discursive struggle over the ... framing of problems'.[22]

When examining how water has been framed as an object of the EU's external action over the period 2013 to 2023, this article first elucidates the 'discursive universe' of EU water diplomacy. This allows, as a second step, to enquire about the 'subsequent political dynamics',[23] i.e., the approach to water in the EU's broader external action that follows from specific discursive frames. In addressing these questions, the article provides insights into EU policy-makers' motives, ambitions, and preferred policy approaches and explores the different interpretations and discursive strategies employed by EU actors aimed at shaping what water diplomacy is and does. It thus contributes to the conceptualization and empirical understanding of water diplomacy within the EU. Additionally, by exposing the struggles over the meaning of the term that arise when a regional actor aims to carve out a niche for itself in a novel area of 'sectoral' diplomacy,[24] the article also offers valuable theoretical and empirical insights to the broader debate on water diplomacy as a concept and practice,[25], and more specifically to the field of 'discursive hydropolitics', responding to Bréthaut et al's recent call for recognizing 'the value of discourses in any analysis of transboundary waters'.[26]

Following the introduction of an analytical framework in section 2, section 3 examines a select set of EU documents pertaining to water in external action contexts. Section 4 first extracts key patterns of EU water-related discourse, showing how several frames of water – notably a geopolitical frame emphasising the water-security nexus and a social frame stressing water for development – currently intersect, resulting in a multi-facetted EU external water action comprising a narrow and a broad understanding of water diplomacy. Second, it capitalizes on the empirical findings to explain the patterns of frames and their evolution over time, drawing on an explanatory framework that combines attention for the global context with an analysis of the policy entrepreneurship of key EU water stakeholders. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for the academic study and political practice of water diplomacy within and beyond the EU.

2   Analytical Framework

To examine EU external water frames and how they impact the EU's water diplomacy approach, this section relies on an analytical framework that derives four frames of water applicable to EU external action from the water-specific International Relations (IR) and the

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[16] Daviter 2011, 26.
[17] Fisher 1997, 4.36.
[18] Hajer 1995, 44.
[19] Antaki 2008, 432.
[20] Diez 2014, 28.
[21] Fisher 1997.
[22] Fischer and Gottweiss 2012, 9.
[23] Daviter 2011, 26.
[24] e.g., Damro, Gstöhl and Schunz 2018.
[25] Sehring et al. 2022; Keskinen, Salminen and Haapala 2021.
[26] Bréthaut et al. 2022, 465.

actor-specific EU External Action Studies (EAS) literatures. It operationalizes these and discusses the discourse analytical methodology and source selection. As a backdrop to this discussion, however, it initially outlines the EU's understanding of domestic and pre-2013 external water action in the international water policy context.

2.1   *Pre-2013 EU Internal and External Action on Water in their Global Context*

EU water policy forms part of a broader water governance framework aimed at ensuring peaceful water relations, within which the EU has progressively taken centre-stage. Home to some of the oldest river basin organisations, Europe has generated much of international water governance norms. Most prominently, the 1992 UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) 'Water Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes' was initially adopted for the pan-European region but opened to wider accession in 2016.[27] EU Member States have in turn shaped the development of international, and national water regimes since the 1960s.[28]

Globally, water resource management has become increasingly tied to environmental issues ever since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit introduced IWRM as 'a process which promotes the co-ordinated development and management of water ... to maximize the resultant economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems'.[29] Just like 'sustainable development', IWRM emphasises economic efficiency, social equity, and ecological sustainability.[30]

Within this multi-level governance architecture, the introduction of the 2000 WFD represented a major event, since it merged otherwise separate aspects of water management into one integrated policy, developing norms on which to base water resource management (WRM). Understanding this Directive is thus key to comprehending the context in which the EU frames its external action on water.

The WFD has been described as a landmark water policy document heavily emphasising environmental protection.[31] Its primary goal is to achieve 'good status' for all bodies of water in the EU.[32] Simultaneously, it develops an economic approach to water based on water-pricing incentives.[33] Zurita et al. therefore identify two major 'perspectives' on how water is 'encoded and framed' in the WFD: an ecological (as a vulnerable resource providing ecosystem services) and an economic perspective (as a commodity providing economic input to production processes).[34] They note that additional perspectives exist in EU members' water laws, notably social (water as a human right/necessity, public good) and heritage (inherited right) frames.[35]

As of the 2000s, the Union also cautiously began to engage externally on water by trying to export its domestic water policy model. Of note is the role of the enlargement process, which saw new Eastern European members adopt the legislation and candidate countries harmonise their national standards with EU ones, including in water conflict hotspots like Turkey.[36] Furthermore, given that the WFD mandates Member States 'establish appropriate coordination with the relevant non-Member States',[37] these latter also concluded WFD-aligned river basin management agreements with European Free Trade Area and Balkan countries. However, beyond its neighbourhood, the EU encountered limited success, especially because the WFD's

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[27] United Nations Economic Commission for Europe 2022.
[28] Aubin and Varone 2004, 50.
[29] International Water Association 2022.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Kallis and Butler 2001; Voulvoulis, Arpon and Giakoumis 2017.
[32] European Parliament and Council of the EU 2000, e.g., Art. 4.5(a).
[33] Ibid., Art. 9.1.
[34] Zurita et al. 2015, 174-175.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Kibaroglu, 2015, 157.
[37] European Parliament and Council of the EU 2000, Art. 3.5.

environmental framing and technical requirements did not resonate with partner countries.[38] In parallel, given the limits to exporting its model, the EU engaged in what could be termed a 'development for water' and 'nexus management' approach to its external water action by 'download[ing] international approaches around IWRM, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and sustainable development mainstreaming and then re-export[ing] them'.[39] This was attempted in particular via the 2002 EU Water Initiative (EUWI), which followed from Development Council Conclusions expressing concerns that the MDGs on water would not be met.[40] The EUWI has been focusing on water-centred dialogue via a partnership approach, notably with African, but later also Latin American, Mediterranean and other countries.[41] Additionally, development aid was dedicated to the water sector to promote the global 'water, sanitation and hygiene' (WASH) agenda, particularly in African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries.[42] Thus, before the explicit discursive articulation of a desire to develop a 'water diplomacy', EU external water action amounted to a peculiar mix of (i) attempted, but by-and-large unsuccessful exporting of the environmentally framed EU model, piloted by the Commission's Directorate-General for Environment (DG ENV), and (ii) a social-developmental framing linked to a partially more successful leveraging of development aid for development aims requiring water availability by the Commission's DG for Development Cooperation (DG DEVCO).

Altogether, the WFD's frames of EU internal water policy in environmental and economic terms is demarcated from (but partially overlaps with) global water governance norms, which primarily emphasise IWRM and peaceful cooperation around shared water bodies. It equally partially differs from EU Member States' own, often 'social' frames of water.

2.2   *Discursive Frames of Water in IR and EU External Action Literatures*

The discussion of its domestic water policy already suggests the co-existence of several water frames in the EU context. This section takes the discussion a step further to extract refined discursive frames of water as an object of EU *external* action. It does so by scrutinizing two relevant sets of academic literature: the IR 'hydropolitics' literature on water,[43] which offers insights into the framing of water in diplomatic contexts and the EU EAS literature,[44] which discusses how the EU as a regional organisation frames objects of its external action across (formerly internal) issue areas. Combining their insights allows for theorizing four frames of water in EU external action.

Focussing on an international water politics and diplomacy perspective, IR theories have been used to examine 'hydropolitics'. Neorealists often highlight the resemblance of the politics of such commonly pooled resources to a zero-sum security dilemma. In turn, neoliberals emphasise opportunities for win-win cooperation to generate absolute welfare gains in transboundary water diplomacy,[45] while constructivist approaches highlight the 'securitization' of water, i.e., their designation as 'political issues of utmost importance that require extraordinary policy responses' to prevent conflict.[46] All these theoretical approaches frame water in *geopolitical* terms, i.e., as a specific geographic *space* that is either a material power resource for actors controlling it or a site of contestation over access and thus a potential source of conflict.

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[38] Adelle, Benson and Agnew 2018, 137.
[39] Ibid., 140.
[40] Council of the EU 2002.
[41] Adelle, Benson and Agnew 2018, 129-130.
[42] Ibid. 131-132.
[43] e.g., Sehring et al. 2022.
[44] e.g., Damro, Gstöhl and Schunz 2018.
[45] Williams 2011.
[46] Oswald and Brauch 2009, 175.

Global governance approaches concentrating on how to 'govern' water propose alternative frames. In particular, they examine the roles of international water law in fostering global water governance and of water management through IWRM, which emphasises sustainable development via maximising 'economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems', and thus highlights its *economic*, *environmental* and *social* dimensions.[47]

The hydropolitics literature has also produced conceptual approaches to water enabling constructive analogies to help generate framings of water. Most notably, the idea that water can be considered a strategic good present 'virtually' in all traded agricultural and industrial goods – through its role in the production process – means that it can be thought of as resource with similar socio-technical properties as other raw materials.[48] Thus, through analogical reasoning, the framing of energy as an object of EU diplomacy, already discussed in the EU EAS literature, can offer interesting insights for water diplomacy. Like water, energy is a quintessential resource that the EU has regulated via the creation of a single market.[49] This points to a first – *economic* – discursive frame that sees energy as a traded 'commodity'.[50] EU energy diplomacy is then in essence 'related to the *external dimension of the EU internal energy market*'.[51] A second, 'energy *security*' frame, perceives energy diplomacy as a means 'to gain access to energy resources and establish cooperation in the energy domain'.[52] It is often considered as a geopolitical frame involving power-based competition (or its avoidance via cooperation) for scarce resources. Two additional frames of energy in EU diplomacy relate to the '*environmental* and *social* sustainability' dimensions of pursuing energy security. In frame three, energy becomes an object of diplomacy because it allows the EU to pursue 'global energy sustainability', relying on renewable and non-polluting sources; frame four perceives energy as a 'public good', accessible for all and provided by the state.[53]

Altogether, the insights from the IR and EU EAS literatures converge around four ideal-typical discursive frames of relevance for examining water as an object of EU external action, in alphabetical order: an *economic frame* stressing water as a commodity, an *environmental frame* concentrating on sustainable water use, a *geopolitical frame* emphasising the water-security nexus and water conflict, and a *social frame* centring on water as a public good. These are operationalized in the next section.

2.3   *Designing the Discourse Analysis: Operationalizing Frames and Methodology*

Frames as 'patterns of organised information by which people make sense of the world' compete in a broader 'discursive universe'.[54] When a specific frame becomes dominant, it enables a certain policy approach and action – empowering specific actors –, while excluding other courses of action and actors. To examine the discursive universe of EU water diplomacy, this section operationalises the above four ideal-typical frames extracted from the secondary literature before identifying the most relevant documents constituting this 'universe'.

For each of these four frames, two sets of codes were generated: first, codes that answer the research question on how water is *fr*amed ('FR') in external action; second, codes related to external water action, including diplomacy, *a*pproaches ('A') that follow from a specific frame and which highlight the preferred instruments and final outcomes of the actors formulating a specific discourse.

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[47] Gupta 2013; International Water Association 2022.
[48] Allan 1998.
[49] See Herranz-Surrallés 2015.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 914.
[52] Ibid., 915.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Fisher 1997, 4.36.

The *economic* frame (ECO-FR) with its emphasis on water as a commodity is discursively represented by terms like '(economic) costs', 'effectiveness', 'efficiency', and 'growth'. An actor that frames water as a commodity can in turn be expected to promote an approach to water diplomacy (ECO-A) that is aimed at creating 'markets', putting a 'price' on water, and encouraging 'private sector investment'.

The *environmental* frame (ENV-FR) perceives water as a natural resource in need of sustainable management and/or protection. This discursive frame is expressed through terms like 'biodiversity', 'climate (change)' (which it considers as primarily an environmental challenge), 'ecological', 'environment*', 'sustainabl*', 'water pollution/quality/stress'. The approaches (ENV-A) that follow from an environmental frame can be observed via terms such as '(global) (multilateral) governance', 'management', and 'environmental protection' (as outcomes), and the promotion of 'sustainable development' (as a means).

For the *geopolitical* frame (GEO-FR), the main focus is water conflict. Indicative of this discursive frame of water in external action are terms such as 'conflict*', 'peace', 'scarcity', 'security', 'stability', and 'tensions'. The approach (GEO-A) prescribed by this frame is discursively represented by terms such as 'cooperation' and 'peace' (as outcome), 'mediation', 'negotiation', 'prevention' and 'regional integration' (as means).

Finally, the *social* frame (SOC-FR) focuses on water as a public good. It can be observed via terms like 'access*', 'dignity', 'equity/equitable', 'human right to sanitation/safe drinking water/adequate standard of living', and references to the protection of 'minorities' and 'women'. Framing water as a public good implies investing in an approach (SOC-A) aimed at 'capacity-building' through 'finance' and other forms of 'support' to attain 'development (goals)' including 'access to water'.

The coding scheme operationalising the four ideal-typical frames was applied by matching these 'theoretical patterns derived from the literature and observed patterns emerging from empirical data' in the form of the most relevant documents of the past ten years relating to EU external action on water.[55] The coding and analysis of each document was done by each author independently and then compared to avoid bias. The documents were selected based on a preliminary analysis of EU water diplomacy informed by the available secondary literature. The Council Conclusions on 'water diplomacy', 'water and human rights', and 'water in EU external action', formed the logical starting point, especially since the one dating from 2013 represents the first strategic EU document exclusively dedicated to water diplomacy. As confirmed by various interviewees, the Council Conclusions provide the foundations and impetus for the EU's water diplomacy, acting as a 'node' for other documentation on the issue.[56] As these Council Conclusions are embedded within the wider priorities of EU foreign policy, the analysis follows up with the Union's major foreign policy strategies (e.g., the Global Strategy) as well as key sectoral policy and diplomacy strategies of relevance for EU external water policy, notably from the environmental and development policy domains. The pertinence of these documents was equally confirmed by the interviewees.[57]

The findings of the discourse analysis were triangulated via six semi-structured interviews conducted between March and April 2023 with actors involved in the shaping of the discourse of EU water diplomacy since the 2010s. To select interviewees, given the focus on the framing of EU water diplomacy, the authors targeted policy-makers involved in the development of EU water strategies since the early 2010s, including at least one representative of each relevant EU body and institution. The interviewees therefore include officials working or having worked on EU external water matters at an EU Member State foreign ministry, at the European External Action Service (EEAS), in the context of the EU's development policies at the European

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[55] Bouncken, Sinkovics and Kürsten 2021, 255.
[56] Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4.
[57] Several other documents initially considered were excluded from the analysis based on feedback from the interviewees.

Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA, formerly DG DEVCO) and in relation to environmental policies at DG ENV. The interviews focussed on the policy-makers' understandings of EU water diplomacy as well as on the contexts within which EU water diplomacy documents were developed.

3   Discourse Analysis: EU Frames of Water and Corresponding Approaches to Water in EU External Action

This section analyses the frames of water in EU external action and corresponding approaches to external water action, including water diplomacy, by comparing the FAC and Development Council Conclusions, which are subsequently contextualized by assessing the framing of water in broader foreign policy strategies, and by examining specific EU sectoral policy strategies.

3.1   *Frames of Water and Approaches to External Water Action in FAC Conclusions*

The Council of the EU published four documents pertaining to water in its external action, which are considered as 'cumulative' documents, complementing each other.[58] They are discussed here in chronological order and by highlighting (dis)continuities across time.

3.1.1   The 2013 'Council Conclusions on Water Diplomacy'

The July 2013 FAC Conclusions introduced for the first time the notion of 'water diplomacy' in the EU context.[59] The ten-paragraph-long document centrally frames water in geopolitical terms, followed in a distant second place by SOC-FR, whereas ENV-FR and ECO-FR play almost no roles.

The document's central idea that water constitutes a security risk is present right from the start when the Council emphasises the potential of water access problems to 'endanger stability and security in many parts of the world',[60] subsuming other frames:[61] 'reconciling different uses of water resources such as drinking water and sanitation, agriculture, food production, industry and energy, are major water *security* challenges.' In particular, the Council notes that the fact that 'aquifer systems, lakes, rivers and river basins do not necessarily follow state borders' represents 'a distinct challenge for water diplomacy'.[62] This problem diagnosis is later complemented by the explicit mention of geographic areas where water security challenges exist, namely the Nile Basin and Central Asia.[63]

The only frame that partially escapes subsumption under GEO-FR is SOC-FR. This latter is developed in two ways: first, by mentioning efforts to promote human rights by 'safeguarding ... the human rights of water and sanitation'[64] and 'integrating a gender perspective and the empowerment of women ... into water diplomacy';[65] second, by highlighting development and humanitarian action through addressing water and sanitation in an 'integrated' way to achieve positive outcomes in 'development' and 'sustainable growth'.[66]

The Council's views on how to address the security challenges arising from the transboundary nature of water systems comprise three primary approaches, all pointing towards GEO-A: by (i) increasing efforts to facilitate regional dialogues on water, mobilising technical

[58] Interviews 2, 3, 4, 5.
[59] Council of the EU 2013.
[60] Ibid., para. 1.
[61] Ibid., para. 2 (emphasis added).
[62] Ibid., para. 4.
[63] Ibid., para. 7.
[64] Ibid., para. 2.
[65] Ibid., para. 3.
[66] Ibid.

and financial resources,[67] (ii) encouraging adherence to global water governance norms 'with the aim of promoting collaborative and sustainable water management arrangements and to encourage and support regional and international cooperation',[68] and, to a lesser extent, (iii) promoting the EU's internal water policy as a model of peaceful cooperation.[69]

In synthesis, given its geopolitical framing of water (GEO-FR), the Council thus posits that transboundary governance represents the key solution to potential competition over water resources (GEO-A), and thus forms the primary objective of its water diplomacy. This aim goes hand-in-hand with tackling the 'social' root causes of these conflicts, mainly through mainstreaming water into development and environmental policies, which appear as secondary considerations in the text.

3.1.2 The 2018 'Council Conclusions on Water Diplomacy'

The more structured, seven-page-long 2018 FAC Conclusions confirm and deepen the patterns seen in the 2013 Conclusions, despite noteworthy differences. While GEO-FR remains most significant, SOC-FR is expressed more substantively, and ENV-FR appears more visibly. ECO-FR is mentioned but remains insignificant.

GEO-FR is employed at the beginning of the Conclusions which stress that effective management of freshwater resources is an 'international issue' of 'overall planetary security'.[70] This frame is subsequently presented throughout paragraphs 2 to 9 (except for 4), including by re-emphasising issues stemming from differing human uses of transboundary water systems.[71] New dimensions are added to the geopolitical frame by (i) introducing the idea that water cooperation can be the source of regional integration or cooperation in other areas,[72] (ii) emphasising the risks associated with the use of water as a weapon of war,[73] (iii) establishing a link between energy infrastructure on rivers and water scarcity,[74] and (iv) arguing that water scarcity can lead to migratory flows towards the EU.[75]

The approaches presented as a response to these perceived issues echo the 2013 Conclusions' GEO-A in an expanded manner. They include high-level political engagement,[76] promoting cooperation,[77] sharing of experience and knowledge (which resonates with the EU's idea of promoting its model abroad),[78] and the integration of water security challenges into conflict prevention early-warning systems.[79] Additionally, referring to the '[c]onstruction of large dams in international rivers such as the Nile or Mekong' which can 'contribute to tensions among riparian States', the Council suggests that '[t]he EU is ready to support efforts to address these challenges, at the request of all the parties'.[80] Indeed, the idea that the EU stands 'ready' to engage if partners request it recurs a few times in the context of promoting 'collaborative and sustainable water management'[81] and supporting 'constructive dialogue between concerned parties deriving from major infrastructure projects with transboundary impacts'.[82]

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[67] Ibid., para. 8.
[68] Ibid.: paras. 9-10.
[69] Ibid., para. 6.
[70] Council of the EU 2018, para. 1.
[71] Ibid., paras. 1-2.
[72] Ibid., para. 5.
[73] Ibid., para. 6.
[74] Ibid., para. 8.
[75] Ibid., para. 2.
[76] Ibid., para. 3.
[77] Ibid., para. 5.
[78] Ibid., para. 7.
[79] Ibid., para. 9.
[80] Ibid., para. 8.
[81] Ibid., para. 11.
[82] Ibid., para. 12.

Furthermore, the 2018 Conclusions render explicit the idea present in the 2013 Conclusions that institutionalized governance arrangements represent the solution to potential water conflicts:[83] 'The EU encourages all relevant parties and stakeholders to develop and maintain transboundary arrangements ... Cooperation on shared water resources is vital to securing lasting peace'.

Unlike in the 2013 Conclusions, in the 2018 document the other three frames are present right from the start amongst a list of reasons as to why water is vital. In particular, SOC-FR is expressed explicitly in the first sentence: '[w]ater is a prerequisite for human survival and dignity and a fundamental basis for the resilience of both societies and the environment'.[84] Yet, while social issues initially remain subjoined to security considerations,[85] the frame is later expressed strongly in an independent fashion when the Council refers to the humanitarian or developmental need to address water-related issues,[86] or, more frequently, the need to ensure the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation,[87] and the importance of water access for women's rights.[88] Simultaneously, elements of a SOC-A outside the parameters of GEO-A are proposed, including 'raising awareness ... of water-related disaster risks',[89] supporting 'human rights defenders',[90] 'integrating a gender perspective into water diplomacy',[91] and mainstreaming 'water and sanitation' in financial and technical assistance.[92]

ENV-FR is equally more strongly represented than in the 2013 Conclusions. In 2018, the Council emphasises the need for 'integrated, sustainable, durable, climate resilient water management' within 'regional institutions and organisations',[93] as well as the interlinkages between climate policy/diplomacy and water policy/diplomacy.[94] Yet, it suggests no approaches beyond promoting multilateral cooperation and mainstreaming – which are expressed in relation to GEO-A or SOC-A – to tackle environmental issues. Like in 2013,[95] the EU's internal water framework is not presented as a model to emulate for ecological purposes but merely as a 'positive experience of cooperation'.[96]

ECO-FR is slightly more visible in 2018, mostly through reference to the importance of water for energy as well as the prospects for developing technology-based and innovative approaches through research and private-public partnerships.[97] Finally, the last paragraph briefly offers an economic approach (ECO-A),[98] namely encouraging private investment in water infrastructure – an idea that does not re-appear in subsequent Conclusions.

Altogether, the 2018 Council Conclusions centrally confirm GEO-FR and GEO-A, while allowing some space for the other frames, notably SOC-FR.

3.1.3 The 2019 'Council Conclusions on EU Human Rights Guidelines on Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation'

In 2019, the Council of Development Ministers published short Conclusions entitled 'EU human rights guidelines on safe drinking water and sanitation', together with a much longer

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[83] Ibid., para. 11.
[84] Ibid., para. 1.
[85] Ibid., paras. 5-6.
[86] Ibid., para. 10.
[87] Ibid., para. 16.
[88] Ibid., para. 18.
[89] Ibid., para. 15.
[90] Ibid., para. 16.
[91] Ibid., para. 18.
[92] Ibid., para. 23.
[93] Ibid., para. 14.
[94] Ibid., paras. 4, 15, 20.
[95] Council of the EU 2013, para. 6.
[96] Council of the EU 2018, para. 7.
[97] Ibid., paras. 12, 19.
[98] Ibid.: para. 23.

annex document. These formed part of a response to commitments of the 'EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy' (2015-2019).[99] The Conclusions exclusively aim to define and delimit the scope and goals of the EU's SOC-A, making the case for recognising a human right to safe drinking water and sanitation as part of its general commitment to a human rights-based approach (HRBA).[100]

The Council initially frames water geopolitically (GEO-FR) with reference to the 'growing imbalance in global water supply and demands lead[ing] to tensions and conflicts, [which] could potentially evolve into a widespread threat to international peace and security'[101] as well as socially (SOC-FR) in relation to the 'human and economic costs' that risk 'arising from dirty and unsafe water'.[102] The Guidelines subsequently affirm and define the EU's rights-based approach, the significance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the EU's international commitments,[103] as well as the need to mainstream water action into the EU's general human rights action.[104] As approaches, the Guidelines stress GEO-A and SOC-A, which come in a variety of forms, including bilateral diplomacy and sectoral dialogue,[105] multilateral dialogue in international fora, including encouraging partners to accede to relevant international agreements,[106] engagement with civil society and with local authorities,[107] and mainstreaming water into trade dialogues and trade-development schemes.[108]

Overall, the 2019 Conclusions form an intermediate, operational step between the more general 2018 and 2021 Council Conclusions, specifically emphasising HRBA to water and, hence, establishing it as a variant of SOC-FR/A, alongside the more long-standing 'development for water' variant.

3.1.4   The 2021 Council Conclusions on 'Water in the EU's External Action'

While the 2018 Conclusions represent an expansion and enrichment of the 2013 Conclusions, the 2021 Conclusions, adopted by the Council of Development Ministers, mark a pivot in framing, approach, and ambition.[109] They shake up the hierarchy of frames in the preceding documents and are much more focused on re-embedding and operationalising 'water diplomacy', in what amounts to greater modesty regarding what the EU thinks it is able to achieve in this domain. This shift is directly reflected in the title itself, which is no longer about 'Water Diplomacy' but, more broadly, 'Water in the EU's external action'. In the text, it is reflected in a significant qualitative and quantitative increase in the prominence of SOC-FR, both in its human-rights and developmental variants, making it the dominant frame alongside GEO-FR. ENV-FR also somewhat emerges from its 'background' role, though it is most often used in relation to SOC-FR. ECO-FR remains insignificant.

The seven-page 2021 Conclusions also differ in presentation and terminology. While the order of the points made follows a similar pattern as in the 2013 and 2018 Conclusions, GEO-FR often dominating the first half of the documents and the other frames the second, the social frame is here strongly present throughout. Moreover, the 2021 Conclusions are the first to explicitly embed themselves in the international water governance framework, making frequent references to agreements under negotiation or recently implemented,[110] and calling on

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[99] Council of the EU 2019a, para. 3.
[100] Ibid., para. 1.
[101] Council of the EU 2019b, 3.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid., 11-14.
[104] Ibid., 15, 19.
[105] Ibid., 21.
[106] Ibid., 22, 25-27.
[107] Ibid., 23, 27, 30.
[108] Ibid., 28.
[109] Council of the EU 2021a.
[110] Ibid., paras. 3, 6, 7, 8, 11, 14.

the EU and its Member States to be ready to engage in upcoming water governance activities such as the 2023 UN Water Conference.[111] This added contextualisation and a wider use of the global water governance nomenclature (e.g., IWRM) suggest that the 2021 Conclusions aim to primarily operationalise the EU's stance on water.

In relation to SOC-FR, the 2021 Conclusions mirror the 2018 and 2019 documents and the latter's increased focus on HRBA, with noteworthy additions. Whereas the strong reference to gender returns and is complemented by a focus on vulnerable groups,[112] there is a general trend to link water issues to policy areas receiving greater political attention, notably health policy and sanitation in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic,[113] or areas that come with substantial funds, especially development and humanitarian policy.[114] This framing translates into SOC-A, stipulating the deployment of development aid to advance water-related aims.

In line with the trend to operationalise the EU's water action, GEO-FR is expressed strongly but in a more action-oriented manner. The 2021 Conclusions again present transboundary water cooperation 'as a tool for peace, security and stability'[115] and stress the importance of 'accession of and adherence to UN water conventions, transboundary agreements and institutional frameworks'.[116] Yet, a new approach (GEO-A) that can complement 'good governance' solutions is presented when the Conclusions argue that:[117]

> it is important to factor in water-related risks and indicators into conflict analysis and programming in fragile states and conflict-affected areas, as well as into the design and deployment of [Common Security and Defence Policy] missions.

With this idea that water considerations need to be mainstreamed into the EU's 'hard power' comes also an emphasis on the need to protect the 'safety and security of water resources, water personnel ... and water infrastructure',[118] which operationalises the general condemnation of the destruction of water infrastructure as a conflict method found in the previous Conclusions.

The use of ENV-FR mirrors the earlier Conclusions. It is mostly contextualised within the wider efforts at global environmental governance and the EU's general action on environmental issues. It is also more frequently expressed in relation to 'sustainable development', linking it explicitly with SOC-FR. In particular, the Council heavily emphasises the overlaps between preserving ecosystems and promoting human development and health.[119]

ECO-FR is restated in the 2021 Conclusions primarily in relation to the social dimension of water: 'water governance' is to 'maximise economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems'.[120] Generally, ECO-FR is used as a supporting element, either underlining the need for private sector financing of water management tools to improve water access, hygiene, and reinforcing transboundary cooperation or emphasising the need to adopt greener methods in the economy to preserve ecosystems and 'foster human development'.[121] It only appears independently when highlighting the need for innovative financing and capacity-building solutions, knowledge-sharing, and more research – which these Conclusions present as the EU's added value.[122]

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[111] Ibid., para. 8.
[112] Ibid., paras. 2, 3, 5, 9.
[113] Ibid., paras. 2, 3.
[114] Ibid., e.g., para. 16.
[115] Ibid., para. 4.
[116] Ibid., para. 17.
[117] Ibid., para. 5.
[118] Ibid., para. 16.
[119] Ibid., paras. 1, 6, 12, 13.
[120] Ibid., para. 12.
[121] Ibid., paras. 11, 14.
[122] Ibid., para. 10.

Overall, whereas the 2013 Conclusions were primarily about the 'what' of water diplomacy (definitions) and the 2018 Conclusions about the 'to what end?' of an EU external engagement on water (goals), the 2019 and 2021 Conclusions focus more on the 'how?' (operationalization in terms of tools and funding). In attempting to operationalize EU 'external water action', the latest FAC Conclusions lift SOC-FR and SOC-A to a comparable level of significance as GEO-FR/A, while linking ENV-FR and ECO-FR to the social frame.

3.2 Frames of Water and Approaches to External Water Action in General EU Foreign Policy Strategies

The most recent general EU foreign policy strategic documents, the 2016 EU Global Strategy and the 2022 Strategic Compass, issued in the name of the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and acknowledged or endorsed by the FAC, contain a few references to water.

The *Global Strategy* subsumes water under environmental matters, which in turn are framed in geopolitical ('environmental security') terms (GEO-FR): 'Climate change and environmental degradation exacerbate potential conflict, in light of their impact on ... water and food scarcity'.[123] The High Representative thus frames water-related problems as an outcome of social and environmental challenges, to which she presents 'pre-emptive peacebuilding and diplomacy' as well as 'monitoring root causes such as human rights violations, inequality, resource stress, and climate change' as solutions.[124] Taking this GEO-A further, the Strategy argues that institutionalized governance processes represent a solution to the geopolitical problems caused by water problems, ideally via 'functional multilateral cooperation'.[125] The *Strategic Compass* only briefly addresses water, framing it as a 'natural resource' subject to inter-state competition (GEO-FR).[126] Water is otherwise not discussed, even in areas to which it is linked in the Council Conclusions, such as women's rights or climate-related risks.[127]

Overall, the EU's foreign policy strategies seem to subscribe to the 2013 Council Conclusions' view that framed water as a natural resource which can produce social tensions leading to geopolitical challenges (GEO-FR). The approaches emphasised come then primarily in the form of geopolitical 'acts' to mitigate the consequences of water-related issues (GEO-A).

3.3 Frames of Water and Approaches to External Water Action in Sectoral Diplomacy Documents

This section analyses the water frames and approaches to water diplomacy in documents that deal with environmental policies and diplomacy and development policy.

3.3.1 Key Environmental Policy Documents

The European Commission's 2019 European Green Deal (EGD) indirectly and the 2020, 2021, and 2023 Council Conclusions on Climate (and Energy) Diplomacy directly constitute the EU's essential sectoral diplomacy documents in the environmental (including climate) domain with relevance for water diplomacy.

Although the *European Green Deal* does address water issues, all references to water are related to internal policies, whereas its section on 'The EU as a Global Leader' does not address water matters. Generally, the EGD advances ENV-A, including better reporting, monitoring, and prevention of water pollution or the preservation of water ecosystems through new food

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[123] European External Action Service 2016, 27.
[124] Ibid., 29.
[125] Ibid., 34-35.
[126] European Union 2022, 23.
[127] Ibid., 28, 38, 41.

production approaches as key solutions to issues of 'water stress'.[128] It also alludes to ECO-A, including '[d]igitalisation' to monitor for 'water pollution'[129] or economic incentives such as 'eco-schemes' which reward farmers for improved management of water quality.[130]

The 2020 *Council Conclusions on Climate Diplomacy* do not discuss water to a significant extent. The only clear reference to freshwater is that of water action as part of the EU's geopolitical approach to climate issues, which 'will ... take climate and environmental factors and risks, including on water, into account in ... strategic engagement with partner countries and work on preventive measures such as early warning systems'.[131] Water scarcity is thus presented as a possible challenge resulting from climate change, indicating a geopolitical frame and approach (GEO-FR, GEO-A). The same frame and approach re-appear in the 2021 *Council Conclusions on Climate and Energy Diplomacy*, which refer to water four times. Pointing to the interconnected challenges of 'climate change, ocean and freshwater degradation, deforestation and biodiversity loss', which endanger inter alia 'water security', they argue for a 'comprehensive approach on water related challenges, including synergies between climate, energy and water diplomacy'.[132]

The March 2023 *Council Conclusions on Climate and Energy Diplomacy* represent the most significant document of its type in relation to water, as they immediately preceded the March 2023 UN Water Conference.[133] The document contains nine references to water. In particular, paragraph 21 stresses the Council's 'diplomatic engagement on water as a tool for peace' (GEO-A) and the importance of integrating 'the climate, peace and security nexus in EU's external policy and actions' with, among others 'climate finance and climate diplomacy including dedicated water diplomacy' (GEO-A).[134]

Altogether, water as an object of EU external action receives limited attention in its key external environmental policy strategies, with a prevalence of GEO-FR stressing the securitization of water and of diplomatic, defence, and governance-based approaches (GEO-A).

3.3.2 Key Development Policy Documents

Whereas the Council Conclusions and foreign policy strategies highlight the need to integrate water into development policies, this section analyses three sectoral strategies issued by DG DEVCO/INTPA: the 2016-20 Strategic Plan, its 2018 revision, and the 2020-24 Strategic Plan.

Water does not feature prominently in the *2016-2020 Strategic Plan*, as it appears only five times in 54 pages. On the one hand, DG DEVCO frames it as a subset of its environmental aims (ENV-FR): 'Tackling climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation and drought, ... overexploitation of natural resources (including water) ... are also part of our agenda'.[135] On the other hand, water is framed – primarily – in economic and developmental, but also geopolitical terms. Improving infrastructure in services such as 'water/sanitation' to 'contribute to sustainable economic growth, job creation' (ECO-FR) is seen as means to aid companies' access to finance and support the 'prosperity, stability and security of partner countries' (SOC-FR, GEO-FR).[136] Centrally, addressing over-exploitation of water resources is depicted as 'key to the development of economic and decent work opportunities' (SOC-A).[137]

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[128] Ibid., 14.
[129] Ibid., 9.
[130] Ibid., 12.
[131] Council of the EU 2020, para. 11.
[132] Council of the EU 2021b, paras. 4, 13.
[133] Interview 1, 2, 3, 5; Council of the EU 2023, para. 12.
[134] Ibid., para. 21.
[135] European Commission 2016, 11.
[136] Ibid., 33.
[137] Ibid., 16.

In the *2018 revision* of the Strategic Plan, published three days before the 2018 Council Conclusions, the references to water go up to 17 for a 75-page document.[138] Similar to the 2016 Plan, the revised document highlights that the sustainable management of water resources is key to economic development and 'the transition towards an inclusive green economy'.[139] Once again, the link between water and socio-economic development thus takes centre-stage, with a close intertwinement of SOC-FR and ECO-FR, observed notably in the emphasis on two nexuses: (i) access to improved water/sanitation services and growth (ECO-A),[140] and (ii) the development of communication technologies and improved water management (ECO-A).[141] A fundamental shift compared to the original plan is evident regarding the objectives of the strategy, now based on the idea that the EU should 'act from a rights based approach', with 'improved access to water' highlighted as the central aim (SOC-A).[142] Furthermore, DG DEVCO places new emphasis on the relationship between the protection of women, health, and WASH (SOC-FR).[143] Additionally, it frames promoting 'sustainable water resource management' as an aspect of mainstreaming 'environment and climate change across all sectors of cooperation and funding instruments' to 'support partner countries' efforts to implement key multilateral environmental agreements' like 'the UNECE Water Conventions' (ENV-A).[144]

The *2020-2024 Strategic Plan* then mentions water 24 times in 77 pages. Similar to the 2018 document, it underscores the HRBA to water, as well as the water-gender nexus.[145] Yet, there are also stark differences. A novelty is the link between the frequently mentioned water/sanitation aim to the Covid/health crisis.[146] Equally novel are the ties with the 2019 EGD and EU climate action more generally, explicitly under 'Theme 2 – Climate Change, Environment, Energy'.[147] The main aims of EU efforts remain however socio-economic: besides increasing 'access to clean water'[148] and 'access to Water and Sanitation', DG INTPA wishes to 'increas[e] the efficiency in the use of water resources, especially in the nexus with energy and agriculture' (SOC-FR, ECO-FR).[149] The EU's objectives should above all be attained via enhanced 'International water dialogue and Water Diplomacy'[150] and by fostering compliance with international agreements and SDGs (ENV-A).[151] Notably, compared to earlier strategies, while there is a specific objective relating to 'Governance, resilience and peace building',[152] GEO-FR is absent from the document.

Overall, in the developmental strategies, water tends to be framed as a scarce natural resource (ENV-FR) whose availability as a production factor is primordial for the socio-economic development of third countries falling under the EU's development policy (SOC-FR and ECO-FR). It therefore requires, protection from 'overexploitation', especially in urban settings through appropriate governance arrangements (ENV-A), which, since 2019, emphasise human rights (SOC-A) in the wake of the EU's commitment, under the 2017 European Consensus on Development, to HRBA.[153] Simultaneously, DG INTPA promotes water as a

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[138] European Commission 2018.
[139] Ibid., 11; ibid., 22.
[140] Ibid., 48.
[141] Ibid., 9.
[142] Ibid., 26, 31.
[143] Ibid., 32.
[144] Ibid., 44.
[145] European Commission 2020, 36.
[146] Ibid., 8.
[147] Ibid., 19-22.
[148] Ibid., 22.
[149] Ibid., 21.
[150] Ibid., 21.
[151] Ibid., 22, 33.
[152] Ibid., 64.
[153] See Council of the European Union 2017.

means to fostering growth (ECO-A), which leads to the type of development it wishes to attain (SOC-A). Geopolitical framings are marginal in the water discourse of the EU's key developmental strategies.

4 Discussion

The analysis of the key corpus of the 'discursive universe' of water in EU external action suggests several key patterns, which this section extracts, discusses and tentatively explains.

4.1 *Extracting Patterns: Key Contours of Contemporary EU Water Diplomacy*

A comparison across all the analysed documents suggests a relatively stable pattern. While no dominant frame for an 'EU water diplomacy' emerges, the analysis suggests a gradual broadening of its discursive universe, with a predominance of GEO-FR and SOC-FR. This goes hand-in-hand with the corresponding GEO-A and SOC-A. Both frames consider water primarily instrumentally, turning it either into a security challenge via GEO-FR/A frames promoted by the FAC and the EEAS or a 'production factor', in other words a means to the end of socio-economic development, via the SOC-FR/A privileged by the Commission's DG DEVCO/INTPA and the Development Ministers in the Council.

Through the course of the analysis, the original 'ideal-typical' frames have been further nuanced, particularly in relation to GEO-A and SOC-FR/A (see Table 1). Whereas the EU's GEO-FR corresponds very closely to the 'ideal-type' theorized initially in terms of water conflict, GEO-A is not interpreted, as could be assumed, as 'resolving disputes over transboundary water resources'[154], for example through military action (even though CSDP missions are mentioned in later Conclusions). Rather, it is primarily understood in a preventive sense of 'promoting water cooperation across the world' and of 'international agreements on water cooperation'. The EU's suggested response to its geopolitical framing of water is thus more and better global governance. Its securitization of water and the implicit anticipation of interest-based conflicts around this scarce resource – perceiving water as prone to allocation problems – thus prompts the promotion of norms to deal with such distributional challenges in an orderly fashion. This *'peace for water'* GEO-A is consequently characterized by the promotion of mediation, international institution-building, governance and cooperation. It co-exists with a (significantly less prominent) *'water for peace'* approach, which sees water as a means to building cooperation and fostering peace. SOC-FR equally emerges as comprising two distinct, yet intertwined variants in the EU context: a 'water for development' frame, which translates into a corresponding *'development (policy) for water'* approach (already used before 2013), and an access to 'water as human right' frame, which prominently emerged as of 2019 and corresponds to a *HRBA* operationalised predominantly via nexus management (e.g., women and water). These two SOC-A are mutually enabling and supportive.

ENV-FR, which was found to correspond to its ideal-typical depiction in the EU's discourse, is present as a 'background' frame across virtually all documents, but there is only limited reference to environment-centred approaches. Where there is, these tend to be about building multilateral governance or adhering to multilateral environmental agreements. ECO-FR remains comparatively low-key, its presence was only discernible in the socio-economically-tilted interpretation of 'sustainable development' in the DG INTPA/DEVCO documents. There are virtually no traces of ECO-A. The environmental 'spirit' of the WFD and its promotion of water-pricing in the EU are thus hardly reflected in its discourse on water diplomacy.[155]

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[154] Sehring et al. 2022, 200.
[155] Kallis and Butler 2001.

Table 1 Frames of Water in EU External Action and Corresponding Approaches (2013-2023)

Theorized frames of water in external action	Variants of water frames revealed by the analysis	Frame description	Approach
GEO	GEO-dominant	Water as potential source of conflict	'Peace (policy) for water' via global water governance
	GEO-secondary	Water as source of cooperation	'Water for peace' via dialogues and cooperation
SOC	SOC-dominant	Water for development	'Development (policy) for water'
	SOC-secondary	Access to water as a human right	'Human rights-based approach' (HRBA) to water via nexus management
ENV	-	Water as a natural resource in need of protection	Multilateral environmental governance

Source: authors compilation

Two additional observations arise when interpreting the findings from an agency-focussed and longitudinal perspective. Considering agency, a focus on the 'producer' of water-specific discourse within the EU reveals that the framing of water and corresponding approaches clearly differ according to the author of a particular document. The documents emanating from the FAC tend to privilege GEO-FR and GEO-A as primary discourses and SOC-FR and SOC-A as secondary ones, whereas the Commission, notably DG DEVCO/INTPA, and Development Council documents tend to inverse this order.[156]
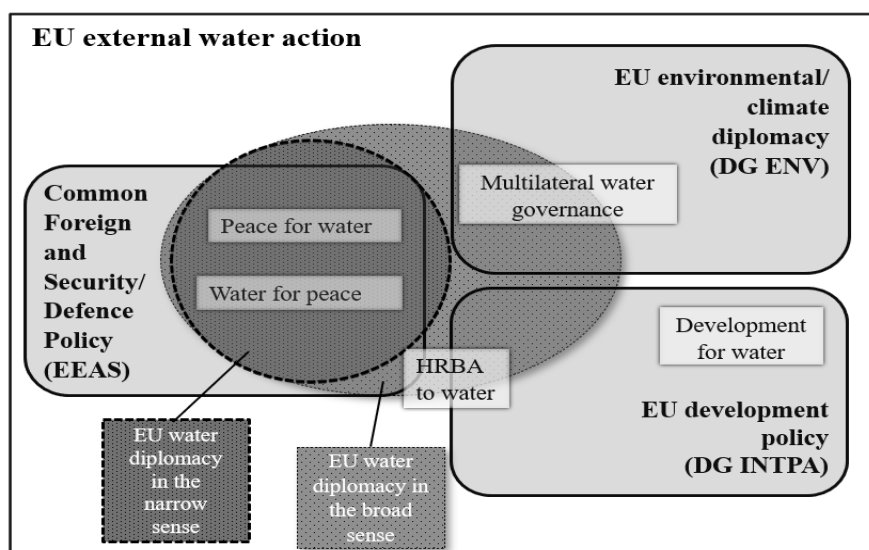
From the longitudinal perspective, covering the period 2013 until 2023, the findings bring out substantial change over time, especially regarding the Council Conclusions. Most obviously, the reference to 'water diplomacy' included in the titles of the 2013 and 2018 Conclusions has not entirely caught on across other documents and was superseded by the broader notion of 'Water in EU external action' in the 2021 Council Conclusions. Notwithstanding this semantic adaptation, the term 'EU water diplomacy' has been firmly established, providing a solid indicator of a parallel evolution of several strands of EU external

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[156] Also confirmed by interview 6.

water action, which has made this latter more multi-facetted. The originally dominant 'development (policy) for water' approach of the pre-2013 era (SOC-A-primary) had been complemented by an approach promoting the creation of multilateral environmental governance applicable to water (ENV-A) (largely replacing the attempt to promote the EU's WFD-based 'model). As of 2013, and under the guise of 'water diplomacy', GEO-FR/GEO-A were developed by the FAC and EEAS. For a few years, this became the dominant EU frame, before SOC-FR/A were reaffirmed, notably when in 2019 the HRBA (SOC-A-secondary) and a renewed focus on nexuses with other policy domains, especially health, and on vulnerable groups gained ground.

As a result, contemporary EU external water action comprises multiple strands. Although there may be a tendency in everyday parlance – even among EU policy-makers – to refer to the entirety of this external action as 'EU water diplomacy', our analysis suggests a more nuanced conceptualization, as illustrated in Figure 1. On the one hand, 'EU water diplomacy in the narrow sense' comprises essentially the European External Action Service's mission on water as part of the EU's Common Foreign and Security/Defence Policy, combining the 'peace for water' and 'water for peace' approaches. On the other hand, however, if water diplomacy is conceived broadly as not just 'preventing ... and resolving disputes over transboundary water resources' but also 'developing joint water governance arrangements by applying foreign policy means which are embedded in bi- and/or multilateral relations beyond the water sector ... at different ... scales',[157] the picture of an *EU water diplomacy in the broad sense* emerges. It combines the *peace for water* and *water for peace* approaches with aspects of the EU's environmental and climate diplomacies aimed at creating multilateral environmental agreements, insofar as they pertain to water, and piloted by the 'environmental community', primarily the Commission's DG ENV, as well as with aspects of the HRBA to water, co-implemented especially by the EEAS and DG INTPA. By contrast, water diplomacy in the broad sense excludes the earlier 'development for water' approach championed by the development community, which has not been co-opted into the EU's water diplomacy.

Figure 1 Situating EU Water Diplomacy in the Realm of EU External Water Action

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[157] Sehring et al. 2022, 200.

4.2 *Explaining the Patterns: Policy Entrepreneurs Exploiting External Opportunity*

The detected patterns pose an explanatory puzzle, begging important questions. First, why did GEO-FR/A – '*EU water diplomacy in the narrow sense*' – arise in the early 2010s? Second, why did SOC-FR/A re-emerge so strongly at the end of that decade? Answering these questions also helps clarify the interrelation between these two dominant frames: do they compete or complement each other? Considering that the 'producer' of a specific discourse appears to be a distinguishing factor between the frames, our explanation adopts an agent-oriented perspective, focussed on key water diplomacy stakeholders within the EU, proposed in the literature on the emergence of external action in originally internal EU policy areas.[158] It is informed by interviews with EU policy-makers.

The explanatory framework starts from the premise that the emergence and evolution of such external action is co-determined by the 'co-existence of (i) an [external] opportunity for the EU, (ii) EU presence ..., and (iii) pro-external engagement policy entrepreneurship'.[159] Presence pertains to the Union's domestic policies. On water, the EU's presence has been strong ever since the adoption of the 2000 WFD. Given this absence of variation, presence cannot explain the evolution of external water action. Rather, this latter hinges on the interplay between varying external opportunity and policy entrepreneurs interpreting and exploiting it. Opportunity 'denotes factors in the external environment of ideas and events'.[160] It is assessed by analysing global norm and interest constellations and specific events relating to an issue 'in search of possible overtures for EU external engagement'.[161] Finally, and importantly, policy entrepreneurs are 'advocates who are willing to invest their resources ... to promote a position in return for future gain', which can be self-interested or norms-oriented.[162] Assessing policy entrepreneurship in a discourse analysis requires examining who adopts a discourse, how they do so and what motivates them to support a given course of (EU external) action.[163] Examining policy entrepreneurs' diverging discursive constructions of 'water' as an object of EU external action allows for unravelling their discursive strategies and the resulting 'struggles' around EU water diplomacy.

Up until 2013, 'the EU's external water policy ... was effectively its response to the international policy agenda so there was already a high level of ... consensus surrounding' it.[164] Whereas no relevant novel *opportunity* could be detected around the emergence of GEO-FR/A with the 2013 FAC Conclusions, a major domestic development was the creation, in 2011, of the EEAS as the EU's body in charge of diplomacy. While DGs DEVCO and ENV had been piloting external water action before, the EEAS became the key *policy entrepreneur* as it sought to carve out a role for itself and saw an added value in linking water to the work of a diplomatic service aiming to get a grip on a series of cross-cutting, global issues (also including energy among others).[165] In close discussion with EU Member States, which were interested, and with the support of departments within DGs DEVCO and ENV hoping for greater attention for water matters, the EEAS managed to get the topic on the agenda of the FAC.[166] To attract attention to water, especially among the foreign and security policy community, it framed water in the securitised terms of GEO-FR/A, which became the dominant framing in the mid-2010s.

The observed evolution with the 2018 Conclusions, which reinforced GEO-FR/A but also emphasised SOC-FR/A to a larger extent, can then be explained partially with external

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[158] Schunz and Damro 2020.
[159] Ibid., 130.
[160] Bretherton and Vogler 2006, 24.
[161] Schunz and Damro 2020, 128-129.
[162] Kingdon 1995, 179.
[163] Schunz and Damro 2020, 130.
[164] Adelle, Benson and Agnew 2018, 139.
[165] Interviews 3, 6.
[166] Ibid.

opportunity. Following the 2015 adoption of UN SDGs as a developmental policy framework and the Paris Agreement on climate change, the EEAS in particular – as the drafter of these Conclusions – found it useful to embed the EU's water agenda into these major global agendas.[167] Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that the securitised approach to water had not generated much enthusiasm among the EU's traditional partners in ACP countries, who were used to working with EU delegations on developmental terms.[168] The EU also did not manage to play a substantive role in the Nile and Mekong cases mentioned in the 2013 Conclusions, as other international actors took the lead. Furthermore, as awareness of water issues within the EU's foreign and security policy circles grew, there was no incentive to maintain the initiative in this policy community.[169] So while the EEAS piloted a broad consultation process on the expansion of the 2013 Conclusions, prominently involving DG DEVCO, but also DG ENV, Member States, and other stakeholders, the concrete aims and operationalization of 'water diplomacy' came into focus. With it came a first re-broadening of the concept, resulting in the re-emphasised SOC-FR/A.

This re-broadening beyond GEO-FR/A is even more visible in the 2019 and 2021 Council Conclusions. Whereas the *opportunity* for altering the discourse around 2021 came inter alia from the major global health crisis of Covid-19, highlighting the necessity of access to WASH, but also from the need to coordinate EU actors in light of the 2023 UN Water Conference, it was again *policy entrepreneurship* that played a pivotal role.[170] The 2017 New Consensus on Development, through its heavy focus on the HRBA,[171] had led to a re-prioritisation of water within the EU development community, as evidenced notably by the difference between the original 2016-2020 DEVCO Strategy and its amended 2018 version. This influenced the drafting of the 2019 Development Council Conclusions, with further repercussions for the 2021 Conclusions. In 2021, this entrepreneurship by the development community was spearheaded by the Council Presidency of Slovenia, a country with a water diplomacy tradition that had enshrined the 'right to water' in its constitution in 2016. It was its Development Ministry that mobilised other Member States, DG INTPA, and various civil society actors to place water on the agenda of the Development Council with the aim of re-affirming, while expanding on, earlier efforts by the FAC.[172] While this initiative led to the observed re-emphasis of the importance of the (expanded) SOC-FR/A, the Member States also insisted on prominently retaining references to GEO-FR/A.[173] The 2021 Conclusions thus provided a re-calibration of these two frames, which, for the time being, complement each other, alongside an operationalization of EU water diplomacy broadly understood.

Altogether, variations in the strength of policy entrepreneurship over time can convincingly explain the pattern of expanding EU external water action in which different frames co-exist: in 2012-2013, the newly created EEAS managed to bring water to the attention of the foreign and security policy community by developing a 'water diplomacy' framed in the (hitherto unused) GEO-FR/A. Gradually, discursive counter-moves by policy entrepreneurs from the development community of the EU Member States and institutions, re-balanced and expanded that framing.

5 Conclusion

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[167] Interviews 1, 3.
[168] Interview 2.
[169] Interview 6.
[170] Interviews 3, 5.
[171] Council of the EU 2017.
[172] Interviews 3, 4, 5.
[173] Interview 4.

This article investigated how the EU frames water in its external action and what implications follow from this framing for the approach it takes to water diplomacy. The discourse analysis of key policy documents from the period 2013-2023 revealed the emergence, as of 2013, of a novel, geopolitical framing (GEO-FR/A), which since the late 2010s co-develops alongside a long-standing, but gradually refined and recently re-emphasised social framing (SOC-FR/A). Environmental and economic frames, prominent in EU domestic water policy, are significantly less invoked. As a result, contemporary EU external water action comprises several strands, including a narrow, geopolitically framed understanding of water diplomacy and a broader one including GEO-A, the human rights variant of SOC-A, and the ENV-A promotion of multilateral water governance norms. The article plausibly explains this evolution with the changing strengths of policy entrepreneurship: in 2012-2013, the EEAS steered the emergence of GEO-FR/A around the theme of 'water diplomacy'; in the late 2010s, the development community responded with a re-emphasis of SOC-FR/A.

While the article's primary focus was to address a research gap – both in (Water) Diplomacy Studies and EU External Action Studies – in relation to how a regional organisation like the EU engages in constructing 'water diplomacy' as a novel activity for itself, these findings have more general implications for the study and practice of water diplomacy beyond the EU. For one, they advance the academic debate on water diplomacy both conceptually and empirically. Conceptually, and answering calls in the literature on discursive hydropolitics 'of undertaking ... discursive analysis systematically' to 'unpack the different types of discourses involved' in (the preparation for) transboundary water interactions,[174] the findings refine our understanding of the breadth and complexity of water diplomacy, which can simultaneously be framed in various ways, implying the possibility to subsume a plethora of different external activities under one broad umbrella term. Similarly, this demonstration of definitional flexibility affirms the validity of alternative vectors of analysis within the context of the (EU's) water diplomacy, like that of (EU) science diplomacy.[175] The article serves thus as a reminder of the ongoing need to carefully consider the construction of the concept in the framework of research in Diplomacy Studies.

Empirically, apart from offering the first comprehensive take on what the EU means when it refers to water diplomacy, the findings expose the discursive struggles that exist around the introduction of the term within a regional entity. In so doing, they underscore that water diplomacy remains a contested term, to which different communities involved in diplomacy attach their preferred meanings. The observation that the geopolitical frame has by now been strongly established within the EU – empowering its core diplomatic actor, the EEAS, and prescribing certain courses of action which did not form part of the EU's portfolio before 2013 – stresses the need for further studies of how institutional power operates when (non-state) diplomatic actors develop 'sectoral' diplomacies on novel issues like water, such as 'digital diplomacy'. Comparative analyses of such development processes, with a stronger explanatory focus combining analyses of external (global-level) and internal (actor-specific) motivations, would help further consolidate our grasp of the dynamics involved in creating novel strands of diplomacy.

From a policy perspective, while the article focused on discourse, EU water diplomacy practice reflects the different frames, demonstrating that the detected approaches co-evolve in a complementary manner: the EEAS engages in 'water diplomacy' by facilitating dialogue and promoting regional cooperation on water governance, whereas DG INTPA primarily implements water-related projects in developing countries, focusing on capacity-building and infrastructure, and promoting IWRM. Both are involved in the promotion of a HRBA to water. Finally, DG ENV exchanges best practices on water management with partners and supports

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[174] Bréthaut et al. 2022, 465.
[175] Tomalová and Ullrichová 2021.

global environmental standards at the UN level. As these activities require different human and financial resources, and are conducted via distinct institutional structures, they have remained complementary. For now, opposing frames advanced by different policy entrepreneurs have been settled by broadening the scope of water diplomacy. This, while unproblematic currently, demonstrates that the EU very much remains a water diplomat in the making.

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