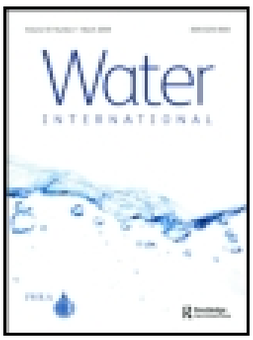

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transboundary water diplomacy among small states: a giant dilemma for Central American regionalism

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ABSTRACT

Water diplomacy aims to shift water disputes from zero-sum games into positive-sum cooperation models though actor-driven approaches. Small states are often viewed as facilitators of diplomacy through a commitment to regionalism and consensus, which highlights their influence in international affairs. Responding to the research question, 'How do "non-decisions" lead to status quo in water diplomacy?' this article discusses how regional water diplomacy based on influence is weakened by the domestic shortcomings of small states' political systems, where authorities use non-decision-making to maintain a status quo that guarantees their legitimized power.

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Introduction

Diplomacy has traditionally been embedded in debates on conflict and security (Zyck & Muggah, 2012). Many scholars have examined the role of diplomacy in avoiding or settling wars (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018). Others have addressed the role of diplomacy in pursuing advantageous outcomes in international disputes (Heurtebize, 2014). Diplomacy has traditionally been used as a tool to obtain political objectives through non-coercive means. For this reason, diplomacy has often been linked to large states that combine military might with political restraint to achieve international political objectives. Former United States president Theodore Roosevelt said, 'Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far' (Augustyn, n.d.)

This logic, of course, applied to the dynamic of (pre-)twentieth-century conflict, characterized by major wars, both hot and cold. The world order was based on coercive strength and balance of power, defined as 'the ability of an individual or group to achieve their own goals or aims when others are trying to prevent them from realising them' (Gerth & Mills, 1958, p. 157). The end of the Cold War, however, has marked a significant change in our understanding of security. Scholars such as Koff (2016) have noted that 'new' global security norms such as human security, environmental security and water security have emerged, calling for threat responses based more on cooperation than competition. Rucktäschel and Schuck (2018) argue that security issues are so inclusive today that it is difficult to keep track of contemporary developments. With the emergence

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of these new security norms, the role of diplomacy has changed. It no longer focuses solely on power and conflict as greater attention is paid to influence, defined as the capacity to have an effect on actors, systems and relationships. As Bachrach and Baratz (1963) noted, power depends on the threat of sanctions, whereas influence does not. Moreover, power-based diplomacy generally approaches peace as an absence of conflict, whereas influence-based diplomacy often entails shared norm-based commitments to peace that are multidimensional, including aspects of justice, rights and equity (Koff, 2016). This approach has been codified in international agreements such as the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals. This highlights a final important distinction between these approaches, as power-based diplomacy often refers to state–state negotiations, whereas influenced-based diplomacy is pursued through multilateralism.

Water diplomacy has emerged within this context. This concept focuses on the facilitation of water cooperation through the establishment of a network of actors at different levels of governance. A 'water diplomacy network' includes the plurality of stakeholders involved in negotiations over water resources. The objective of water diplomacy is to shift water disputes from zero-sum games into positive-sum models of cooperation (Islam & Susskind, 2013). It can be both pre-emptive and reactive, and as such, water diplomacy pursues the end of water-based conflicts, through both power-based negotiations and the engagement of normative ideals such as democracy, transparency, social inclusion and empowerment (Carmi, Alsayegh, & Zoubi, 2019; Farnum, 2018). It is not a synonym for norm-based approaches, such as Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM), to which it is sometimes linked in the literature, but it contributes to their attainment and their foundational ideals through the use of influence.

Like the general scholarship on diplomacy in global affairs (Ingebritsen, 2010), this literature identifies small states as facilitators of water cooperation through the promotion of evidenced-based consensus (Honkonena & Lipponen, 2018; Van Genderen & Rood, 2011) and political dialogue with a variety of actors. These studies examine influence more than power, and they present small states as facilitators of cooperation within multinational water basins and regions characterized by numerous shared basins.

This study critically analyzes this seemingly accepted truth by examining water diplomacy in Central America to respond to the research question, 'Do small states necessarily pursue cooperation and consensus in regional water governance in the absence of large states?' In theory, Central American states should show greater propensity to engage in water diplomacy, because they are all 'small'. However, in his study of cross-border water peace, Koff (2017) highlights the fact that local transboundary water politics generally reflect local power (a)symmetries, while regional norms highlight the shared values mentioned above. Consequently, regional norms face implementation problems due to the disconnect between localized power-based discussions and regional influence-based norms (using the distinction set out by Bachrach & Baratz, 1963). Though small states, such as those characterizing Central America, often support cooperation in international affairs due to their vulnerability, they do not always comply with these commitments domestically (Maganda, 2013).

Thus, a secondary question addressed in this article asks, 'How do "non-decisions" (see definition below) lead to status quo in water diplomacy?' We refer to 'non-decisions' because the states composing the Central American Integration System (SICA for its acronym in Spanish) formally support water diplomacy. However, non-decisions are

defined as formal support for regional policy change combined with informal domestic non-compliance/non-implementation. Formality refers to the legal regulation of water resources while informality refers to decision making in a context that lacks legal regulation. Bachrach and Baratz (1963, p. 641) explain non-decisions in the following terms:

> When the dominant values, the accepted rules of the game, the existing power relations among groups, and the instruments of force, singly or in combination, effectively prevent certain grievances from developing into full-fledged issues which call for decisions, it can be said that a non-decision-making situation exists.

In the field of transboundary water governance, Vij, Warner, Biesbroek, and Groot (2019) adopt this focus when examining the relationship between hegemons and non-hegemons, in which material and ideational power interactions establish a 'power interplay'. They identify 'hegemonic vulnerabilities' as domestic factors that hinder the ability of hegemons to exert power over non-hegemons, leading to non-decisions and the maintenance of the status quo. In Central America, due to the absence of hegemonic power, these domestic vulnerabilities, which are often emblematic of small states (Koff & Maganda, 2015), explain why countries in this region have not complied with international norms that they formally support.

This article comprises five sections. Following this introduction, the next part reviews the literature on water diplomacy and discusses the relevance of small-state theory to this scholarship. The third part discusses the emergence of 'regional water security' as a norm within the framework of Central American regionalism. The fourth part analyzes the (non) implementation of these norms, highlighting the importance of informal decision-making networks and 'non-decisions' in small Central American states. The last part presents the article's conclusions.

Research designs and methods

This article engages the literature on water diplomacy through the lens of small-state theory. According to this paradigm (Katzenstein, 1985), small states exert influence in international affairs through their openness to international economies, their niches in global economies, their promotion of social solidarity (due to notions of vulnerability to external shocks), their commitments to regionalism, and their propensity for interpersonal relations. The Central American Integration System is a regional agreement among eight small states: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Belize and the Dominican Republic. Nicaragua has the largest territory, at 129,000 km^2, and Guatemala has the largest population, at over 16 million. Belize is the smallest in both size and population, with just under 400,000 inhabitants and an area of 23,000 km^2. While no single definition of 'small state' exists in the international relations literature, all eight countries can be considered small according to the literature on small states in global affairs in terms of geographic size, population and international influence (the three criteria discussed in this scholarship). The entire region measures 570,000 km^2 and includes 51 million people. By contrast, northern neighbour Mexico's landmass is almost a million km^2, and its population is over 120 million. Southern neighbour Colombia has over a million km^2 and a population near 50 million (Central America Population 2018, 2018).

In terms of regional integration, SICA was born in 1991 when the founding member states signed the Protocol of Tegucigalpa, extending earlier cooperation for regional peace, political freedom, democracy and economic development. The organization has a normative and institutional structure including a Secretariat, a Council in which the member states are represented, a Parliament and a Court of Justice. Specialized institutions also exist, such as the Regional Committee on Hydraulic Resources (CRRH for its acronym in Spanish) and the Foro Centroamericano y República Dominicana de Agua Potable y Saneamiento (FOCARD-APS), which are relevant to this article. According to small-state theory, such countries should demonstrate active commitment to regional governance as a way to extend their influence in global affairs and lower individual national vulnerability to external shocks. Studying SICA within the framework of water diplomacy permits us to critically examine this hypothesis, as all its member states are considered small.

This article is based on a review of the water diplomacy and Central American water management literatures; official documents from SICA, the European Union (EU), programmes that funded Central American regional water management, and international organizations such as the United Nations, Global Water Partnership, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, etc.; and reports from national governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Selected interviews were conducted in 2013–2016 and 2018 with water experts and water management officials and NGO representatives in SICA member states.

Literature review: water diplomacy between conflict and peace

The emergence of water security in global affairs highlights the unequal distribution of water resources. The idea that water may become scarce can lead to uncertainty that promotes zero-sum decision making and conflict (Susskind & Islam, 2012). Facing such uncertainties, decision makers often 'circle the wagons' by enacting defensive policies aimed at maximizing water quantities for their own constituents. This is especially prevalent in regions where surface and groundwater sources cross political boundaries (Cortéz-Lara, 2012; Kauffer, 2014; Yáñez-Arancibia & Day, 2017)

The notion of water diplomacy directly addresses this defensive logic. Water diplomacy contends that 'water is a flexible resource and through use of processes and mechanisms to focus on building and enhancing trust, even countries in conflict can reach agreements that satisfy their citizens' water needs and their national interests' (Susskind & Islam, 2012, p. 2) Much of the literature specifically focuses on water diplomacy techniques or toolboxes, such as joint missions, shuttle diplomacy, bargaining models and education, to reduce conflict between riparian states (Grech-Madin, Döring, Kim, & Swain, 2018; Zarghami, Safari, Szidarovszky, & Islam, 2015). This emerging scholarship presents analyses from different world regions, such as Asia (Barua, 2018), the Middle East and North Africa (Farnum, 2018), and North America (Macfarlane, 2015).

The common thread linking these studies is the presentation of water diplomacy as a way to convert zero-sum decision making into positive-sum cooperation through the establishment of multi-partner networks and evidence-based decision making. Islam and Repella (2015) note that the Water Diplomacy Framework diagnoses water problems, identifies intervention points, and proposes sustainable resolutions that incorporate

diverse viewpoints and uncertainty as well as changing and competing demands. While approaches to water diplomacy vary, Islam and Susskind (2013) identify six key tasks in this framework:

(1) Identification of appropriate stakeholders with network interest that can be adequately represented in all local knowledge forms;
(2) Joint fact-finding for shared understanding of key variable interaction;
(3) Value creation to expand the usable quantity of water through new techniques to identify virtual or embedded water-based mutual gains approaches;
(4) Informal problem-solving to ensure that the product of water negotiation takes the form of a proposal that can be agreed on by appropriate political officials;
(5) Agreement on how to organize follow-up efforts to ensure that actions can be modified or enhanced as preliminary results become clear; and
(6) The individuals, groups and organizations involved should spend time together reflecting on lessons learned, so that further capacity-building is possible.

In this literature, informal cooperation is an important theme. Yasuda, Hill, Aich, Huntjens, and Swain (2018) propose multi-track diplomacy, underlining the significance of cultural norms of informal processes of cooperation. Similarly, Barua (2018, p. 60) contends that 'multilateral informal dialogues need to take place to develop an accepted definition of cooperation, which meets the needs of all riparian states'.

Water diplomacy's ability to incorporate multi-track diplomacy includes cooperation among a plurality of actors within both formal and informal networks, and evidence-based policy has led to a recent focus on small states as natural actors within this framework. Van Genderen and Rood (2011) contend that water diplomacy could be a niche for the Netherlands in global affairs. They explain that niche diplomacy emerges when three conditions are met: an actor has specialized knowledge that is in demand; it commits to long-term investments, activity and a broad network in a policy arena; and it acknowledges niche recognition in the form of institutional responsibility. Similarly, Honkonena and Lipponen (2018) show how Finland's participation in transboundary basins is characterized by information and action coordination.

The general literature on small states in global affairs highlights these themes. Scholars such as Koehane (1969) and Panke (2010) have explored how small states have transformed consensus-building abilities into leadership roles in international organizations. Numerous studies of small states have focused on mechanisms small states use to extend their influence. These include national identity (Campbell & Hall, 2009), partnership ideology (Katzenstein, 2003), specialized knowledge aimed at establishing niche economies (Ken, 2007), and integration in regional economies to improve global competitiveness (Verdun, 2013).

As mentioned, Katzenstein's (1985) seminal work on small states in world markets identifies characteristics that define small state governance: relatively homogeneous populations; openness to international economies; niches in global economies; social solidarity due to perceived vulnerability to external shocks; amplification of influence through region-building; and efficient and effective governments (because of a propensity for interpersonal relations). While the first characteristic has been disproved, the others remain valid (Siitonen, 2017). These characteristics combine well with the water diplomacy framework, which promotes the inclusion of a plurality of stakeholders, often

through informal decision-making systems. For this reason, this article examines water diplomacy in Central America, where regionalism includes only small states, which would seem to provide positive conditions for the establishment of water diplomacy based on the conclusions of this literature.

Formal regional water cooperation in Central America

Central America is characterized by important water management paradoxes. The region receives heavy rainfall, and it can be considered water-rich (Global Water Partnership, 2016). Table 1 demonstrates that water resources per capita are abundant throughout the region (except in El Salvador) in comparison to other parts of the world.

Table 1 also shows the significant water coverage variance in Central America. According to the Global Water Partnership, the irregular temporal and geographical distribution of precipitation, and the scarce mechanisms of water storage and regulation, contribute to this variance (Ayala, 2018). As a result, important segments of the population lack access to water or sanitation. FOCARD-APS (2015) reports that 3.5 million people in Central America do not have access to water suitable for human consumption, and 10 million do not have access to sanitation.

Water access problems affect both urban and rural populations throughout the region. For example, the capital cities of Panama (Panama) and Managua (Nicaragua) have reached maximum water capacity. Similarly, water prices have soared in parts of Costa Rica, where hotels are paying up to USD 120,000 per month for water due to shortages (Water Crisis Continues in Tourism Paradise, 2016). In rural areas, drought has caused more than USD 650 million in losses in agriculture, hydroelectric power generation and drinking water since 2014 (Ayala, 2018). In 2016, Central America's 'dry corridor', along the west coast of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, experienced the worst drought of the past 10 years, with over 3.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Similar dry periods have occurred in Panama's 'dry arch' along the country's west coast (Global Water Partnership, 2016).

Table 1. Renewable internal freshwater resources in Central America, 2014 (from World Bank data, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/er.h2o.intr.pc).

Country	*Water resources per capita (m^3)*
Guatemala	6,857
Honduras	10,291
Belize	43,390
Nicaragua	25,972
El Salvador	2,488
Costa Rica	23,751
Panama	34,989
Comparative Cases outside Central America	
Brazil	*73,929*
China	2,061
USA	8,844
Mexico	3,292
South Africa	821
Nigeria	1,252
Germany	1321
Netherlands	652

Italics: Greater than the Central American average.

These vulnerabilities explain why small Central American states would engage in regional water diplomacy, defined as 'regional cooperation focused on building and enhancing trust aimed at satisfying citizens' water needs and national interests' (Susskind & Islam, 2012, p. 2). Water security, defined as

> the capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods, human well-being, and socio-economic development, for ensuring protection against waterborne pollution and water-related disasters, and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability (Global Water Partnership, 2016, p. 36)

informs both citizen needs and national interest. In pursuit of this objective, SICA has firmly established a regional water cooperation strategy focusing on integrated environmental security and sustainability (Campos, 2006, FOCARD-APS, 2015).

The CRRH was created on 9 September 1996 to serve as a follow-up to the Central American Hydrometeorological Project. This committee includes seven Central American states, and it implements the Water Agenda (formally adopted in 2009), the main regional water security framework in Central America. This agenda presented a new vision of how to address Central American water cooperation issues. Proposed measures include the joint construction of regional policy instruments (Draft Central American Water Agreement, CONVERGIRH), a regional integrated water strategy (ECAGIRH) and a regional integrated water action plan (Grupo Interagencial del Agua, 2009, PACAGIRH). This integrated water action plan is based on three principles: inter-institutional agreement coordination; review of obsolete or non-functional legal and institutional frameworks; and promotion of the concept of the economic value of water. This ambitious agenda was established through water diplomacy, in consultation with a network of governmental and non-governmental actors. Specifically, it aims to establish a process of value creation to expand the usable quantity of water, with the help of new techniques to identify virtual or embedded water based on the mutual-gains approach (Islam & Susskind, 2013).

To achieve this objective, SICA has integrated water discussions into a more complete environmental security framework aimed at converting a zero-sum competition among member states for water resources into a positive-sum cooperative agenda focused more broadly on promoting environmental security and disaster prevention through regional cooperation. SICA water management is part of the region's 'environmental subsystem'. This subsystem integrates water governance with disaster risk reduction and integrated risk management, environmental management, rural development and climate change. The subsystem establishes a 'strategic and operational alliance' between SICA agencies related to risk management (CEPREDENAC), IWRM (CRRH and FOCARD-APS) and environmental management (CCAD). Most government and non-governmental stakeholders participating in the establishment of this subsystem viewed it as an important space to strengthen coordination and communication among actors in various policy arenas as well as a means through which other relevant SICA branches of government related to disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation can be engaged (European Commission, 2015). These advances reflect the literature on small states in global affairs, because they seem to indicate how Central American states pursue regionalism to protect themselves from environmental and economic shocks. These formal advances also reflect important

lessons from the scholarship on water diplomacy, because they indicate how Central American states pursue a collective regional response to vulnerabilities that affect each state individually. The objective of this regional agenda is to shift national political platforms away from positions aimed simply at maximizing claims to limited water resources, to policy frameworks that promote cooperation by linking water to more comprehensive regional environmental risk management systems that benefit all members.

Formal regional legislation was passed to promote this cooperative approach to environmental risk management, including the Central American Policy for Comprehensive Risk Management, an update of the Environmental Plan for the Central American Region (PARCA III), and the introduction of the Central American Strategy for Comprehensive Management of Water Resources 2010–2020, together with the Central American Plan for Integrated Water Resources Management (European Commission, 2015). In formal terms, water diplomacy seems to be characteristic of the Central American region because of this policy framework shift aimed at promoting cooperation and trust in water discussions by linking this resource to higher political goals linked to citizens' needs and national interests. FOCARD-APS and CRRH language mirrors water diplomacy principles through their focus on networks and consensus building. A recent Global Water Partnership (2016) study on water resources in Central America also highlights the plurality of actors at the local, national and regional levels that support regional water security, especially in Central America's 23 transboundary basins, which represent 36.9% of the overall territory. The report focuses on cross-border cooperation among NGOs and local authorities in transnational spaces.

As the literature review above has illustrated, such multi-track diplomacy is a recognized characteristic of water diplomacy strategies. Important reports on water resources in Central America by the Organization of American States (2018), SICA (2009), European Commission (2015), Global Water Partnership (2016) and the Unión Internacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza highlight the important networks of governmental and non-governmental actors working together in the promotion of transboundary water sharing in the context of regional environmental security. Specific programmes have included the development of actions to define national and local organizational structures for water management within environmental security frameworks, the creation of management instruments to generate big data and information on water and the hydrological cycle, the implementation of citizen monitoring of shared basins and joint evaluation of water quality, and the establishment of cross-border water basin councils that include a variety of stakeholders.

This seems to indicate that water diplomacy, as suggested by the hypothesis presented above in line with the international relations literature, has been implemented in the Central American region, at least in the establishment of formal regional arrangements and implementation instruments. The following section investigates whether this is actually the case.

'Non-decisions' and their impacts on water diplomacy in Central America

One of the most interesting aspects of the water diplomacy framework regards its perceived success in conflict regions. For example, Dinar and Dinar (2000) edited a special issue of *International Negotiation* that included comparative analysis of diplomacy in various transboundary water basins, and case studies of the Mekong River basin as well

as basins shared by India and Bangladesh and Israel and Jordan. Susskind and Islam (2012) similarly present their water diplomacy framework with explanations relating to Israel and Jordan. Based on the discussions above, water diplomacy seems to be very relevant to Central America, where various political and social conflicts have characterized the history of the region. Kauffer (2014) documented how colonial and postcolonial disputes have led to inter-state tensions over how and where borders were drawn in the region. She also addressed the political disputes of the 1970s and 1980s, when Cold War politics affected the region in the form of inter-state tension and brutal civil war in Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Transnational organized crime has also made security an overwhelming priority in the region (Booth, Wade, & Walker, 2018).

Despite these historical tensions, water scholars and participants in Central America have highlighted the importance of localized transnational networks in the region. Rodriguez Herrera (2014) illustrated how inhabitants in the Paz River basin, on the El Salvador/Guatemala border, overcame the inertia of national governments to establish a localized transnational water cooperation system in response to environmental degradation and its impacts on quality of life in the region. Medina (2014) examined the institutionalization processes of localized cooperation that led to the formation of the Grupo Gestor Binacional de la Cuenca del Río Goascorán on the El Salvador/Honduras border. More generally, López Ramírez (2007) argued in his study of hydro-political vulnerability and resilience in Central America and the Caribbean that transnational cooperation is a characteristic of the region, reducing the probability of cross-border armed conflict over water ('water wars'). Furthermore, he stated that localized transboundary cooperation may provide an avenue for confidence building and conflict prevention at the regional level. This proposal was supported by interviews with water officials who recognized bilateral cooperation between Costa Rica and Panama along the Sixaola River and the Trifinio Treaty between El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala as important ratifications of transboundary water cooperation (selected personal interviews). All of these developments are supported by SICA, and all of them contribute to the region's formal water diplomacy framework.

Despite these encouraging trends, regional water cooperation remains a challenge, as stated above. This is one of the paradoxes of water management in Central America: regional programmes are formally institutionalized through SICA, and transnational networks of sub-national stakeholders implement them at the local level, but national governments have not yet implemented water directives, nor do they seem to support water diplomacy (defined above as the promotion of formal and informal cooperation among local, national and supranational stakeholders with the objective of maximizing the value of water resources).

Water diplomacy in Central America: where ambition meets inaction

The previous section showed how SICA has promoted water diplomacy in Central America by integrating water resources in an environmental security, disaster management and climate change framework based on national interests. On paper, these programmes are impressive, because they seem to indicate national commitments to regional water diplomacy strategies. They also seem to reflect the interests and platforms of grass-roots mobilization and the inclusion of stakeholders from different levels of governance that characterize water diplomacy frameworks. Nonetheless, recent

interviews (personal interviews with Central American water experts, 2018) and reports (European Commission, 2015) reveal that this ambitious agenda has met with inaction by SICA's member states.

On the one hand, weak implementation can simplistically be explained by a lack of financial resources, which characterizes many regional organizations throughout the world. A report by the European Commission (2015, p. iv) stated, 'The regional organizations working in environmental management and disaster preparedness did not receive sufficient funds from national governments to continue their work after EU had phased out its assistance.' While funding difficulties are relevant to Central American water debates, deeper regional governance issues have affected the implementation of water diplomacy in SICA.

EU reports (European Commission, 2011, 2015) have also indicated numerous underlying difficulties that have hampered SICA's Water Agenda. First, our review, and other policy papers, such as the recent report of the Global Water Partnership (2016), recognize the general implementation problems that have hindered SICA since its inception. The *Evaluation of the EU's Cooperation with Central America* (2015, p. i) stated:

> The current Central American Integration System (SICA) is shouldered with an expansive mandate to advance regional integration, based on the Tegucigalpa Protocol of 1991. However, the System has few autonomous powers to implement the agenda. Most of its actions need to be unanimously approved by the Presidents of Central American member states. Also, SICA has not been able to count on reliable financing of its operations from its member states.

Of course, this general weakness of the Central American integration system has been a major focus of EU development aid: the EU invested €115 million in 2007–2013 to reinforce SICA's institutions and policy effectiveness (European Commission, 2015).

But this support created another major setback in relation to the establishment of SICA's environmental subsystem. The commission's evaluation concluded that EU support for environmental programmes did not sufficiently consider SICA nation-states as owners of regional integration strategies. Specifically, the report observes (p. iv):

> The EU chose to primarily direct its support at the executive agencies of the Central American Integration System (SICA) while not taking sufficiently into account in its approach that SICA Member States as owners of the overall regional integration process in Central America also needed to own and commit to any institutional reform initiative or technical reform proposal of this process.

This is followed by a recommendation that the EU put stronger emphasis on member-state ownership of regional integration through its partnerships with Central American governments.

The EU's limited attention to the importance of member states as owners of Central American regional integration strategies touches on a major issue in water diplomacy. This literature discusses the need to assemble a plurality of stakeholders in water management discussions. However, the literature does not necessarily address the issue of 'ownership' of these discussions. Presumably, the various participants in water negotiations are the 'owners' of these discussions. External actors or donors presumably should not attempt to control them. By explicitly supporting regional institutions and non-governmental stakeholders and diminishing the significance of SICA member states

in regional water and environmental management programmes, the EU actually undermined water diplomacy in Central America by excluding key actors from regional water negotiations where diverging positions on issues such as privatization and water rights have hindered harmonization of national water strategies and regional cooperation. This point reinforces the discussion presented in the introduction, which differentiates power and influence. The EU certainly seems to play a hegemonic role in the region (employing the framework of Vij et al., 2019) through its exercise of material power (development aid) and ideational power (support for regional water security and integrated environmental security). However, non-hegemons can resist this supposed power. As Bachrach and Baratz (1963) noted, formal power is only legally legitimized when actors subject to that power consider the imposed law legitimate. In this case, the EU is an external hegemon, and the regional legal framework which it politically and financially supported was not accepted as legitimate by national authorities in Central America. This undermined the material and ideational power of the EU in the region, and its influence as well.

Non-decisions and maintenance of the status quo

In addition to ownership difficulties in the regional integration process, transparency and results-based decision making, characteristics of water diplomacy (as identified by scholars such as Susskind and Islam), are also problems in the Central American water integration system. For example, interviews with observers of Central American water politics asked how research affects policy in Central American states. A number of barriers to the integration of scientific evidence into policy debates were identified. These include a lack of funding for systematic research, the legacy of past civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador, and the present conflicts in Honduras and Nicaragua, which have targeted academic elites in those countries and persecuted environmental mobilization. A group of academics noted in interviews that their team was threatened during field research in 2013–2016 by some political officials and it was impossible to obtain GIS data on transboundary river basins through official channels in the countries in the region, except Costa Rica (personal interviews, September 2018). Experts on Central American water debates also noted that Costa Rica is the only Central American state with a solid academic infrastructure that includes sufficient resources to participate in scientific partnerships with colleagues from other world regions (personal interviews, September 2018). In Guatemala and El Salvador, the logic of social science depends on international projects, and when external funding does exist, project dynamics follow NGO rather than academic guidelines, which obviously affects the validity of research and how it is integrated into dialogues with policy makers. In Belize, only research by foreign scholars, think tanks and NGOs is policy oriented. In Honduras and Nicaragua, academic researchers are persecuted, so exchanges with government officials are blocked. These obstacles obviously affect the level, breadth and accuracy of information that contributes to domestic and cross-border policy dialogues on water management in Central America, thus limiting the effectiveness of water diplomacy networks. Most significantly, the lack of scientific dialogue with policy makers reflects weak transparency in water governance systems and contributes to informality (Kauffer, 2017).

This lack of transparency and evidence-driven policy is a significant difficulty that water diplomacy faces in Central America. As stated above, the literature on small states

Table 2. State of national water laws and Integrated Water Resources Management principles in SICA member states, 2018.

Member state	*Water law definition*	*Water law implementation*	*IWRM principles*
Belize	No	No	No
Costa Rica	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Dominican Republic	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
El Salvador	No	No	No
Guatemala	No	No	No
Honduras	Yes	No	No
Nicaragua	Yes	No	No
Panama	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**

in global affairs highlights informal systems and the ability of political actors to facilitate consensus in public debates through interpersonal relations. However, transparency requires rules and clear procedures. This includes adherence to and implementation of international norms and the institutionalization of administrative bodies. In the water diplomacy literature, this has been highlighted by Schmeier and Shubber (2018). Central America lacks these formally binding commitments to international water norms. For example, no Central American country has signed and ratified the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses, which entered into force in 2014 (Kauffer, 2017). At the regional level, the Global Water Partnership (2016) notes that none of the 23 transboundary surface water sources or the 18 transboundary aquifers in Central America have a formal legal regime for their development.

Domestic water governance is also often based on informal negotiations and ad hoc policy due to lack of definition, passage and implementation of national water laws. Only two countries in Central America (Panama and Costa Rica) and three in SICA (Panama, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic) have passed national water laws that are based on water security principles through the adoption of IWRM (Global Water Partnership, 2016). This is illustrated in Table 2.

Belize has introduced legislation on sustainable development and natural resource management, but nothing specifically related to water. The legislation includes no references to SICA or CCAD (Koff & Maganda, 2015). Similarly, El Salvador has no specific water law. In 2017, the four parties in the Legislative Assembly proposed a new 'Ley integral del agua', which focuses primarily on privatization. As of July 2018 they had agreed on only five articles, none of which are related to the regional management of water, SICA or CCAD (Kauffer, 2018). Even Costa Rica's national water law, which does refer to IWRM, makes no mention of SICA or regional water management (Global Water Partnership, 2016). Only Guatemala includes a general reflection on regional collaboration through SICA in the 'Politica Nacional del agua, Estrategia 2011' with respect to transboundary agreements on the Trifinio River basin, shared with El Salvador and Honduras. However, Guatemalan national law is not consistent with the policies agreed on in SICA's Water Agenda due to the following national guidelines:

> (1) The use of international watercourses should be subject to bilateral treaties; (2) each international watercourse should be negotiated and regulated by a specific bilateral treaty; (3) the State of Guatemala will first consider meeting national needs, and will not be obligated to provide a specific quality and quantity of water because this can be affected by natural factors; and (4) establishment of compensation schemes for environmental

> services that allow protecting water goods and services, and compensation for the use and utilization of the water they receive. (Global Water Partnership, 2016, p. 16)

Interviews with Central American water officials also indicated that regional water policies are not viewed as integral components of national water frameworks. Officials in Belize, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala were aware of the existence of Central American regional strategies on environmental governance – including water management, water security and rules for transboundary water governance – but they contended that regional agreements had no effects in transboundary water cooperation in Central America. In the vacuum of legal clarity over administrative responsibilities in water governance regimes caused by the dearth of national water laws in the region, national water officials and agencies attempt to maximize their own authority within the decision-making systems governing water resources. This reflects the situation explained by Robertson and Beresford (1996, p. 23) in their study of 'new managerialism' in Australia, where they noted that 'a set of power relationships create tensions at a number of levels – between commonwealth and state government agencies; between state government agencies and within individual agencies – which act to prevent effective decisions from being taken'. 'Non-decisions', defined as '"mobilization of bias", that is, the prevailing norms, precedents, myths, rituals, institutions and procedures that operate in favour of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others' (Schattschneider, 1975, p. 71), and the status quo result from water agencies and officials adopting territorial behaviour within ill-defined systems of water governance. Bachrach and Baratz (1975) noted that non-decisions can be pursued through different means, from coercion to co-option. However, they effectively argue that 'the indirect forms of non-decision making, are the most important utilization of an existing bias of the political system, such as a norm, precedent, rule or procedure; or reshaping and strengthening the mobilization of bias as a whole' (p. 900). These indirect forms of non-decision-making most closely resemble the current landscape in Central America, and undermine water diplomacy, despite a lack of overt resistance to regional water cooperation frameworks. The status quo persists through such indirect non-decisions. The final section addresses this through a discussion of small-state theory.

Conclusions

Water diplomacy frameworks include the establishment of networks that promote joint fact finding and value creation to expand usable quantities of water, leading to the transformation of defensive zero-sum logics into collaborative positive-sum dialogues. These dialogues can be the foundation for regional water management regimes (Koff, Maganda, & Conde, 2017). More specifically, the scholarship on small states in global affairs has indicated how and why such countries often play pivotal roles in region-building processes through influence peddling, consensus building and ideational leadership (Siitonen, 2017), and the specific literature on water diplomacy similarly recognizes these roles for small states.

Central American water management debates present an interesting test of these paradigms. The empirical evidence presented above illustrated how the emerging regional water management regime has been undermined by national authorities that have

manipulated informal decision-making systems (resulting from lack of national water laws) to promote non-decisions and the status quo. This would seem to contradict both the scholarship on small states in global affairs and the literature on water diplomacy. What explains these unexpected outcomes?

A number of salient points emerge from this research. In response to the first research question presented above, small states are not inherently supportive of regional integration, which contradicts one fundamental assumption in the small-state literature. Specifically, because all of the states in Central America are small, they all follow similar realist region-building strategies (De Lombaerde & Norton, 2006). 'Small-state behaviour' requires associations with large states, especially regional hegemons, that facilitate an extension of influence in global affairs through region building. Scholars of comparative regional integration (Mattli, 1999) discuss the importance of such hegemons in region-building processes. No such regional hegemons exist in Central America, which undermines the incentive to engage in regional integration, especially in the field of water governance, where Central American states have not signed and ratified international treaties. Without a hegemon, no incentive for region building exists, because vulnerability to external threats is not sufficiently addressed through integration. The only hegemon present in regional water discussions is the European Union, which is an external actor with limited legitimacy because it undermined member states' ownership of the regional integration process in Central America through political and financial support focused solely on regional institutions.

This discussion of hegemons and non-hegemons is also relevant to political power in Central America. Water diplomacy, like diplomacy in general, is normally associated with power (a)symmetries in international affairs. As mentioned, Vij et al.'s (2019) discussion of hegemonic behaviour focuses on material and ideational power. Neither of these sources of power is present among SICA's member states. Therefore, it is important to draw the distinction between power and influence (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963). The EU wields influence in the region through material and ideational contributions to regional water governance, but it does not have power because it lacks legitimacy as an external actor. Consequently, Central American water diplomacy is hindered because the political power of national water agencies and officials in the form of legitimized authority surpasses the material and ideational influence of the European Union, despite the vulnerabilities presented earlier.

Finally, the Central American case also demonstrates that 'non-decisions' are a means to maintain the status quo in regional water governance and inhibit water diplomacy, even when incentives for regional cooperation exist. SICA has established regional water policies that are embedded in environmental security frameworks based on the national interests of SICA member states. Simultaneously, local authorities and NGOs have promoted grass-roots water basin management, especially in transboundary areas. In this context, nation-states have maintained control over water governance (and blocked implementation of regional water policies) though inaction as much as resistance. Because most SICA member states have not formalized water governance procedures through (updated) national water laws, ad hoc policy making and informal decision making characterize water governance in the region, which blocks policy innovation. Consequently, the domestic characteristics of small-state political systems actually undermine water diplomacy instead of reinforcing it. Koff and Maganda (2015) have already tested these assumptions in the field of water management through a comparative study of commitments to transboundary water management in Luxembourg and Belize. They found that implementation of transboundary water governance was hindered by

the informal nature of governance in both countries. They concluded that the informality that characterizes small-state governance, due to the presence of interpersonal relations in conjunction with weak legal frameworks, actually blocks the definition and implementation of effective water management strategies. Hence, national authorities indirectly but purposefully prevent regional water policy frameworks from emerging in Central America by promoting uncertainty as a means to maintain their own political authority. As a result, water diplomacy is challenged through inaction rather than resistance, and multilevel networks of water stakeholders remain unable to implement water diplomacy and overcome the zero-sum water conflicts that characterize the region. SICA's water policies will only be implemented when member states adopt them through national water laws as part of a process of taking ownership of regional integration. Only then will influence-based regional policies enjoy power-based implementation at the (trans)national and local levels.

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