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The Geneva Water Hub (GWH) aims to develop the hydropolitics agenda to help prevent water conflicts at intersectoral and transboundary levels at an early stage and promote water as an instrument of peace and cooperation. Its Research and Education function – carried out by the Institute for Environmental Sciences (ISE), the UNESCO Chair on Hydropolitics, and the Platform for International Water Law of the University of Geneva – contributes to a better understanding of the political challenges of water governance (in particular, institutional frameworks, regulatory regimes, policy processes, and conflict resolution mechanism) covering all levels of issues, whether local, regional or international.

Discourses in Hydropolitics: Why and How? A New Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Interplay between Transboundary Waters and Politics through Discourses

We are witnessing blooming initiatives for the measuring and monitoring of hydropolitical tensions. The rationale is straightforward: to get ahead of the crises curve, we need to identify potential water conflict hotspots. This, in turn, is achieved by using a wide range of quantitative indicators – from precipitation patterns and water use to demographic trends – and new data analytic techniques such as machine learning and remote sensing.

Yet, the likelihood and intensity of tensions related to water resources rise as the rate of change within a basin exceeds the institutional capacity to absorb that change. In other words, hydropolitics is also about institutional arrangements, actors and agendas, and thus qualitative analysis should remain a major component for hydropolitics research.

We build on recent calls for more research on the role of discourses in shaping hydropolitics and propose a new conceptual framework, inspired by critical discourse theory, for a systematic

discursive approach to hydropolitics. The added value of our framework is two-fold. First, our framework identifies four categories of discourses – dominant, institutionalized, hegemonic, and sanctioned – and their underlying processes, enabling a more structured and systematic analysis of the dynamics shaping hydropolitics. Second, we embed our framework in a broader research approach combining global and in-depth analysis to better understand the key triggers leading to cooperation and tensions over transboundary waters.