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Excellences,
Ladies and gentlemen

It is a honor and a great pleasure for me to be here with you to take stock of 25 years of water cooperation in Central Asia and to try to determine its future outlook.

I would like to warmly thank the Government of Uzbekistan for hosting this event – all the more as it is the second high-level dialogue it organizes on water cooperation in the region after the Samarkand conference two weeks ago where the participants recognized the importance of strengthening bilateral and regional cooperation on the use of water resources in Central Asia, taking into account the interests of all states involved. These two conferences in a row reflect on the one hand the urgency of intensifying and systematizing water cooperation to address the looming water crisis in the region, but also, on the other hand, the recent and spectacular policy changes in Uzbekistan – in particular its opening up towards all its neighbors and its strong will to engage and to take positive action. Switzerland is much impressed by these changes and supports them wholeheartedly.

We all perfectly understand that without water there is no life, no food, no energy, and no security. Water has made it possible for our societies to establish themselves and to progress. Indeed, water has always been an enabler of development, in Central Asia as elsewhere. Our region is mostly arid; it has had a long and unique history of water management linked to the vital importance of water for economic development. The water management technologies invented in Central Asia several thousand years ago helped support life and culture in the deserts, steppes and mountains. They gave birth to civilizations that inspired many.

However, there is a risk that this development enabler could turn into a bottleneck if we fail to commonly address the global water crisis. This crisis is multifaceted. One of its expressions is the decrease of water availability per capita. The challenge can also be expressed in terms of quality – as the bulk of waste water continues to be discharged directly into the environment without treatment.

As many of you know, Switzerland is the water tower of Europe: water originating from Switzerland flows through multiple fluvial networks that connect us directly with 17 countries in Europe, from France and Germany to countries much further away, such as Romania. Such interlinkages call for shared responsibilities in water management to identify and generate the best mutual benefits. This can be done in all aspects of transboundary water management, including common planning and river basin organizations, including concrete operational cooperation at the local level. And we know from experience that transboundary water management is not only useful: it is beneficial – also for an upstream country like Switzerland.

Benefits from water cooperation in transboundary watersheds include better and fairer access to water and other basic services such as energy, and generally better conditions for sustainable growth, leading overall to more trust, stability, and regional exchanges.

Since water supply is likely to become an always greater source of tension and instability, Switzerland committed itself to promote transboundary water cooperation and to strengthen hydro-diplomacy to leverage water cooperation to prevent conflicts and sustain peace and security. Against this background, Switzerland has established a High-Level Panel on Water and Peace in Geneva two years ago; it has also supported a number of diplomatic initiatives under the name of “Blue Peace”, including in Central Asia where Switzerland has had a longstanding development cooperation supporting the strengthening of national frameworks for water management and the enhancing of regional water cooperation.

The Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC) is the oldest and only official regional organization in the water sector; it brings together the five Central Asian States on the basis of equity, equality and consensus. Its achievements however remain modest and its status seems challenged by some of the countries in the region – which frustratingly weakens the institution.

Numerous other regional initiatives were launched in the last years to try to reenergize the regional water cooperation under the auspices of bilateral partners such as Germany or of the United Nations – such as the recent initiative by the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy promoting river conventions for both the Amudarya and the Syrdarya, an interesting proposal that unfortunately could not get consensual support by all five countries in the region.

Switzerland follows all these initiatives with great interest, and occasional trepidations. They all demonstrate the acute need for a candid and honest dialogue amongst the Central Asia countries, and they indicate that the avenues for such a dialogue are diverse. We believe that, in the end of the day, the structure chosen by the regional countries for their dialogue is not very important; what is really important is to find a structure that puts all partners at ease, in full confidence, and to restart practical discussions as quickly as possible. Switzerland would be glad to support any such structure if it proves capable of delivering results.

All Central Asian countries – on the occasion of the Blue Peace Central Asia Dialogue for 2030 Water Security and Inclusive Growth which many of you attended – agreed last June on the establishment of a “High Level Dialogue Platform of Central Asian Countries on Integrated Water Resource Management”, with support from Switzerland. Initial proposals for the Platform’s working structures and for its work program have been approved. It could easily include the preparatory discussions towards possible River Conventions for the Syrdarya and the Amudarya – including a relaunch of the process from scratch – if such is the wish of its participants.

Let me reaffirm the full support of Switzerland for an action-oriented and structured cooperation process among the five Central Asian countries. We're convinced that formalized high-level dialogue combined with concrete collaborative steps such as sharing data and infrastructure or developing new financing tools for transboundary water management can be a powerful engine of change and contribute to strengthen cooperation for sustainable development and mutual prosperity in Central Asia.

I wish you a fruitful discussion and I look forward to continuing our mutual cooperation.