

From the jetty to a shared river of peace: a hydrological reflection on trust, war and the lives downstream

Abstract

The September 2026 visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to the United States, hosted by President Donald Trump, provides a context for examining peace through hydrological perspectives. This commentary aims to explain how respectful engagement between major powers may create opportunities for gradual peace and to consider the implications of subsequent decisions for smaller countries and ordinary families. Aquatic ecology, applied limnology and ecotoxicology provide the conceptual basis. Hydrological connectivity, relationships between upstream and downstream areas, sediment memory and repeated monitoring organise the discussion. The Malay proverb Gajah bergaduh, pelanduk mati di tengah expresses the vulnerability of smaller actors when powerful actors clash. A proposed adaptation, Gajah berdamai, pelanduk boleh bergembira, expresses the conditional possibility that smaller actors may benefit when powerful actors cooperate. Major disputes remained unresolved after the meeting, and hydrology cannot predict diplomatic outcomes. The analogy nevertheless directs attention to whether sustained dialogue, restraint and cooperation benefit students, families and shared environments. Peace requires continued care, much as a water body requires observation beyond a single sampling day. This scholarly commentary presents no new field data or empirical evaluation of the summit.

Keywords: hydrological connectivity, sediment, peace, water and conflict, ecotoxicology, reflective commentary

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Introduction

Sediment sampling with an Ekman grab from a jetty offers a useful starting point for considering consequences that are not visible at the surface. An earlier account describes how such fieldwork contributed to a research career and subsequent professorial responsibilities.¹ The methodological lesson has wider relevance: a calm surface cannot reveal the full history of a water body. Bed sediments may retain contaminants from earlier human activities. However, a single grab sample cannot establish the date or cause of deposition. Historical interpretation requires suitable sediment cores, reliable chronology and supporting evidence.^{2,3}

During the September 2026 state visit, President Donald Trump hosted President Xi Jinping at the White House on 24 September. Trade, artificial intelligence and strategic rivalry featured in the discussions. Reuters reported a two-month extension of the trade truce, with substantial differences still unresolved.⁴ The courteous public encounter provided a reason for cautious optimism. As with an apparently calm water surface, however, public appearances offer limited evidence about underlying conditions. Any enduring benefit depends on subsequent conduct.

At the arrival ceremony, Xi advocated competition within agreed bounds, avoidance of confrontation, regular military dialogue and stronger crisis communication.⁵ These remarks presented rivalry as something that could be managed without armed conflict. At the state dinner, he emphasised friendship between the two peoples and compared the movement of history to a river that continues to flow.⁶ Their humanitarian relevance lies in the possibility of safer childhoods, uninterrupted education and families remaining together. Such possibilities merit attention while remaining aspirations whose fulfilment requires action.

The river metaphor draws attention to the reach of political decisions beyond the place where they originate. Mutual respect and practical restraint may benefit families far from the negotiating table. Public statements express intentions, but their lasting significance must be assessed through the conduct of both governments.

The objective of this commentary is to interpret the encounter through aquatic ecology, applied limnology and ecotoxicology and to examine how continued respect between major powers might benefit people affected by their decisions. A connected river system serves as a metaphor for upstream choices and downstream lives. The comparison clarifies responsibility while acknowledging that hydrological processes cannot measure political intentions or predict peace from a single summit.

The catchment and the movement of consequences

A river receives water and material from tributaries and surrounding land. Hydrological connectivity helps explain how changes in one part of a catchment affect other parts.⁷ In field teaching beside a pond or drainage channel, observing surrounding land, flow direction, and possible disturbance sources provides essential context for interpreting a sample. Evidence from one station represents only part of the catchment.

Political decisions also have consequences beyond their point of origin, although governments differ fundamentally from rivers. Trade restrictions, threats, war and cooperation may affect households, classrooms, laboratories and waters far from those making the decisions. The human implications include a student's ability to complete a practical course, a parent's access to food and a child's protection from violence. Describing these people as downstream receptors must not obscure their agency, dignity or future opportunities.

The perspectives of students, family members, mentors and researchers bring the everyday implications of diplomacy into focus. These perspectives support a practical question: do the benefits of diplomatic engagement reach daily life? Relevant considerations include safety during study, dignity at work and the ability to protect shared waters.

Figure 1 compares the movement of consequences within a physical river catchment and a political system. The physical pathway

connects disturbances on surrounding land and tributaries to a main river and its downstream receptors. The political pathway connects decisions about trade, threats, war and cooperation to daily life. Students completing courses, parents obtaining food and children requiring safety retain their own voices and futures. The central question is whether diplomatic engagement creates conditions in which people can study safely, work with dignity and protect the waters on which they depend.

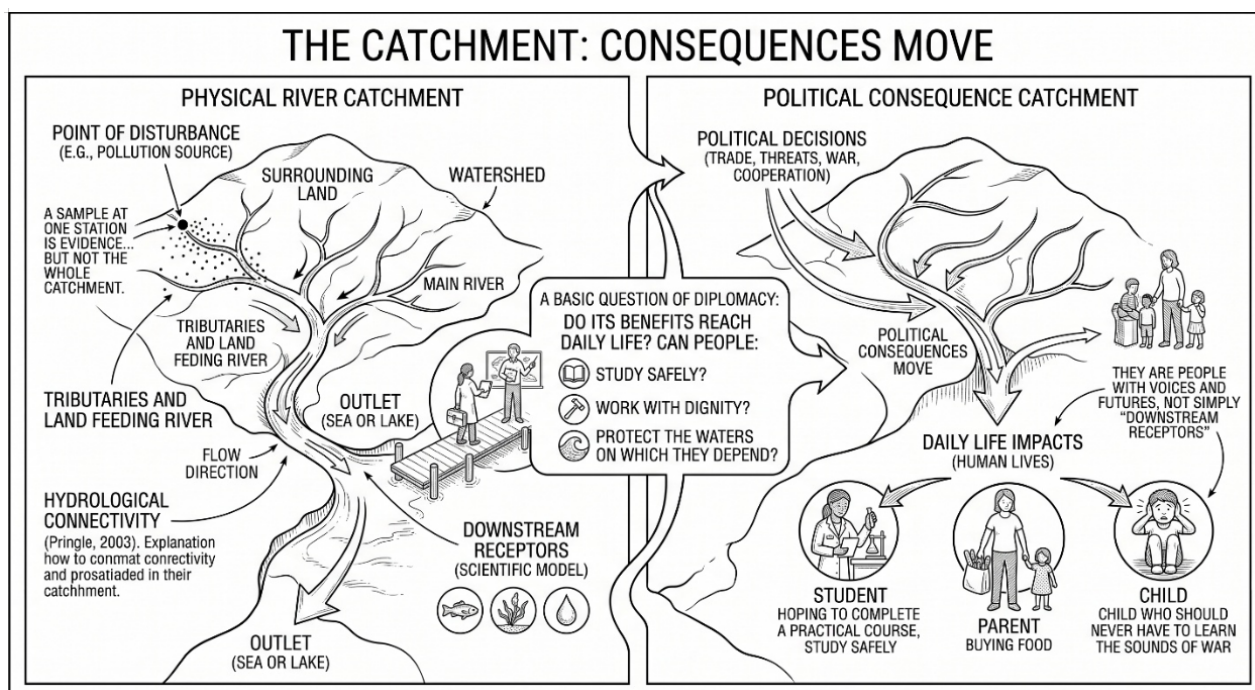


Figure 1 The catchment model of physical and political consequences. Hydrological connectivity is informed by⁷ the political comparison is a conceptual interpretation. Conceptual illustration prepared for this commentary.

Sediment memory and the suffering of war

Concern for peace requires recognition of the harm caused by war. An earlier study examined atrocities of the Second World War through an ethical interpretation of ecotoxicological principles, including source, pathway and receptor.⁸ Planet under Siege considered the legal and moral responsibilities associated with wartime pollution and its persistent environmental burden.⁹ A further commentary addressed the vulnerability of students and civilians caught amid geopolitical conflict.¹⁰ These works provide the ethical context for considering opportunities to prevent further harm.

Stream, river and lake sediments can retain legacy contaminants.³ Carefully interpreted sediment cores can reconstruct some historical changes in water quality.² These scientific observations provide the basis for an ethical extension: damaged environments, interrupted education and human memory may preserve consequences long after immediate violence disappears from public attention. Grief cannot be expressed as a contaminant concentration. The comparison instead

encourages sustained attention to what remains after the visible event has passed.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has issued rules and recommendations for protecting the natural environment during armed conflict.¹¹ From the perspective of water, sediment and aquatic organism protection, prevention deserves particular emphasis. Restoration remains necessary after damage, but it cannot return every lost life or recover every lost year of learning.

Figure 2 distinguishes the physical record preserved in sediment from an ethical interpretation of the continuing consequences of war. Sediment cores can provide evidence of historical contamination when their chronology and depositional context are established. Human memory, damaged environments and interrupted education represent different forms of persistence. The comparison does not equate grief with contaminant concentration. It instead directs attention to consequences that remain after a visible event has passed. Prevention and restoration form complementary responses, although restoration cannot recover lost lives or all lost years of learning.

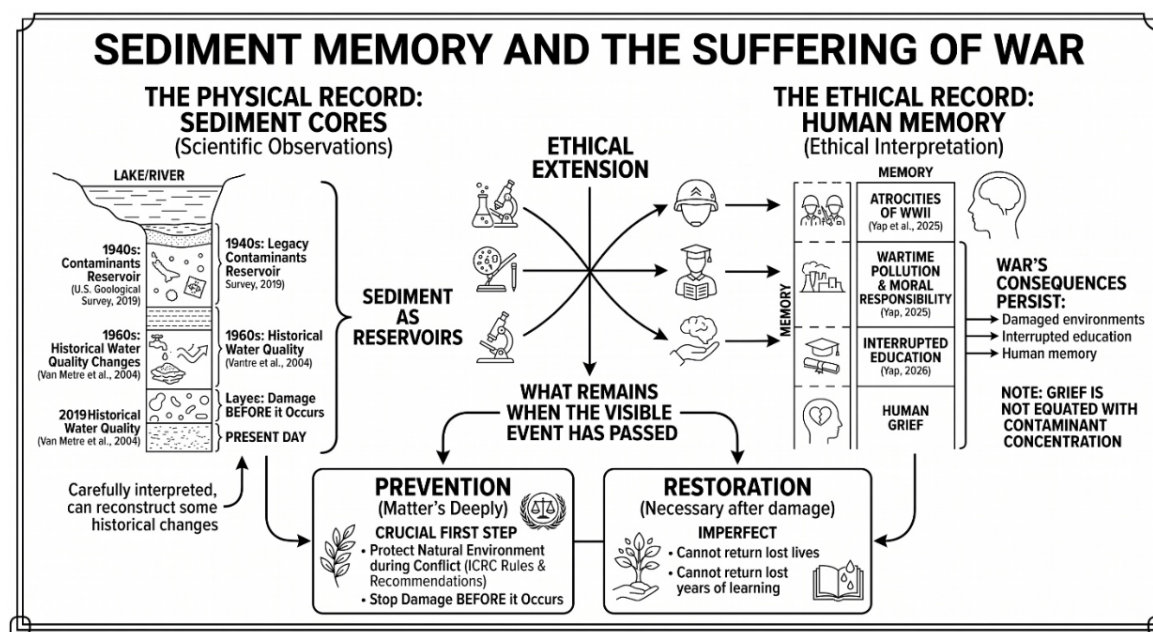


Figure 2 Physical sediment memory and ethical human memory of war. Scientific context is provided by^{2,3} and the ethical discussion draws on^{8,9,10} Environmental protection during armed conflict is informed by¹¹ The diagram distinguishes scientific evidence from ethical analogy.

Upstream elephants and the pelanduk downstream

The Malay proverb *Gajah bergaduh, pelanduk mati di tengah* means that when elephants fight, the mousedeer dies between them. An earlier commentary applied this image to the disruption experienced by students and civilians during geopolitical conflict.¹⁰ This commentary proposes a hopeful reversal: *Gajah berdamai, pelanduk boleh bergembira*, meaning that when elephants make peace, the mousedeer may rejoice. The second expression is an adaptation proposed for this discussion, rather than a traditional proverb.

The word *boleh* is essential because it expresses possibility rather than certainty. The mousedeer may rejoice if dialogue leads to repeated restraint and decisions that improve safety. A warm welcome alone cannot guarantee that outcome. Differences concerning trade, Taiwan and artificial intelligence remained.⁴ A temporary arrangement creates time for further negotiation; its value depends on how that time is used.

In a river basin, upstream withdrawals can affect downstream water availability, while downstream communities retain their own needs and agency. Research on transboundary basins examined how surface water scarcity and dependence may create conditions for conflict and how cooperation may reduce some risks.¹² That study concerns water scarcity and does not explain the Washington summit. Its relevance here is limited to grounding the hydrological image of unequal dependence.

Malaysia and other smaller countries should not be represented as passive pelanduk awaiting decisions by major powers. Sovereignty and the capacity to speak independently remain central. The metaphor describes the reach of conflict among powerful actors without denying the choices available to others. Meaningful peace among major powers must leave space for smaller countries to choose and protect their futures.

Figure 3 uses the metaphor of elephants and the pelanduk, or mousedeer, to consider the effects of relations among major powers on smaller countries and civilians. Conflict may expose students and families to decisions over which they have little control. The proposed peaceful reversal is conditional: benefits require repeated restraint, cooperation and management of outstanding disputes. The comparison with a shared river basin illustrates unequal dependence while recognizing downstream needs. Smaller actors retain sovereignty and agency throughout the analogy. Meaningful peace therefore requires room for other countries and communities to protect their own futures.

Tributaries of trust

Repeated insults may encourage suspicion and lead subsequent actions to be interpreted as threats. Respectful conversation, a welcome and a willingness to meet again may support a different pattern. The Malay proverb *Sikit-sikit, lama-lama jadi bukit* means that little by little, something substantial can be built. Applied to diplomacy, this expression highlights the possible value of cumulative acts of restraint and cooperation.

Continued flows sustain a river, while diplomatic trust requires continued communication and conduct. This comparison is an analogy rather than a hydrological law. Article 2(3) of the United Nations Charter requires member states to settle international disputes by peaceful means.¹³ Maintaining communication during disagreement and fulfilling modest commitments offer practical ways to support further dialogue.

Difficult questions remain after a courteous encounter. Water may appear clear while its sediment still requires examination; similarly, warm words should be followed by careful observation of decisions and their effects. Cautious optimism about respectful engagement can coexist with scrutiny of whether benefits reach families beyond the ceremonial room. Hope acquires practical significance when it is accompanied by attention to evidence.

UPSTREAM ELEPHANTS AND THE PELANDUK DOWNSTREAM: FROM GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICT TO CONDITIONAL PEACE

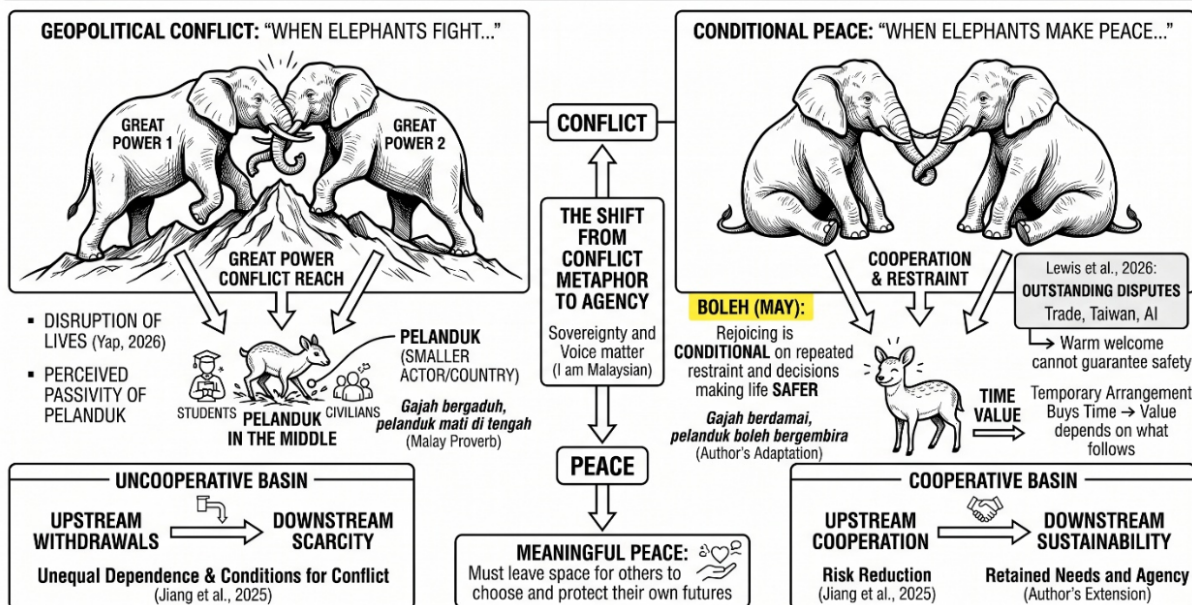


Figure 3 Upstream elephants and the pelanduk downstream. The conflict metaphor draws on,¹⁰ unresolved summit issues on,⁴ and the river basin comparison on.¹² The peaceful reversal is a proposed adaptation rather than an inherited Malay proverb.

Figure 4 presents trust as something sustained through repeated conduct. Insults and hostility can accumulate into suspicion, while respectful conversations and kept commitments can support cooperation. The Malay proverb *Sikit-sikit, lama-lama jadi bukit* expresses the possibility of gradual accumulation. The river analogy links continued diplomatic contact to repeated flows rather than

a single rainfall event. Peaceful dispute settlement supplies a legal context for this interpretation. A courteous meeting can justify hope while also requiring scrutiny of subsequent decisions. The practical concern is whether benefits extend to families beyond the ceremonial room.

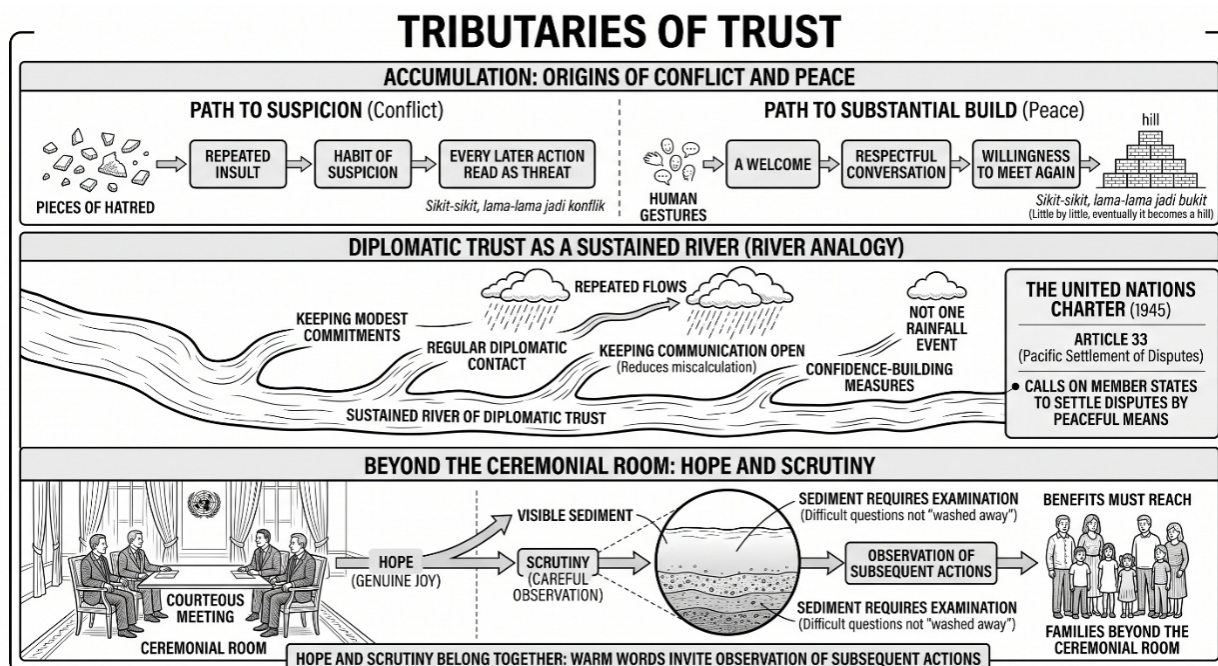


Figure 4 Tributaries of trust. The diagram presents a conceptual analogy between sustained river flows and continued diplomatic care. Peaceful dispute settlement is informed by the United Nations Charter.¹³ The proposed pathways are interpretive and do not represent an empirically tested model of trust.

Repeated monitoring and the duties of a mentor

Field teaching requires students to record where and when sampling occurred, measure the relevant variables and repeat observations where feasible. A single measurement describes conditions at a particular moment. Repeated observations can provide evidence of change. The expression “Basic is still basic” captures a methodological requirement: observation, inference and aspiration should remain distinct.

The observation is that the presidents met publicly and that reporting described a temporary trade extension alongside unresolved issues.⁴ The inference proposed here is that continued dialogue may create opportunities for restraint. The aspiration is that those opportunities benefit people in both countries and elsewhere. Just as a single river sample cannot establish continuing ecosystem health, a single diplomatic encounter cannot demonstrate permanent peace.

Family welfare, student safety and scientific collaboration provide practical criteria for considering the value of diplomacy. Researchers

require access to shared waters and opportunities to exchange knowledge, while students require safe fieldwork, functioning laboratories and willing teachers. Suspicion and restrictions may make these conditions harder to sustain. The earlier account of fieldwork with an Ekman grab illustrates the importance of ordinary learning opportunities.¹ Such conditions deserve protection for every student.

Figure 5 compares repeated environmental monitoring with careful interpretation of diplomatic engagement. An isolated measurement describes a particular moment, whereas repeated observations may reveal change. A single public meeting likewise provides limited evidence of continuing peace. The framework distinguishes observation, inference and aspiration. In teaching and mentorship, this distinction supports attention to student safety, functioning laboratories and opportunities for scientific collaboration. These ordinary conditions matter to the next generation of researchers and should remain visible when discussing the consequences of political decisions.

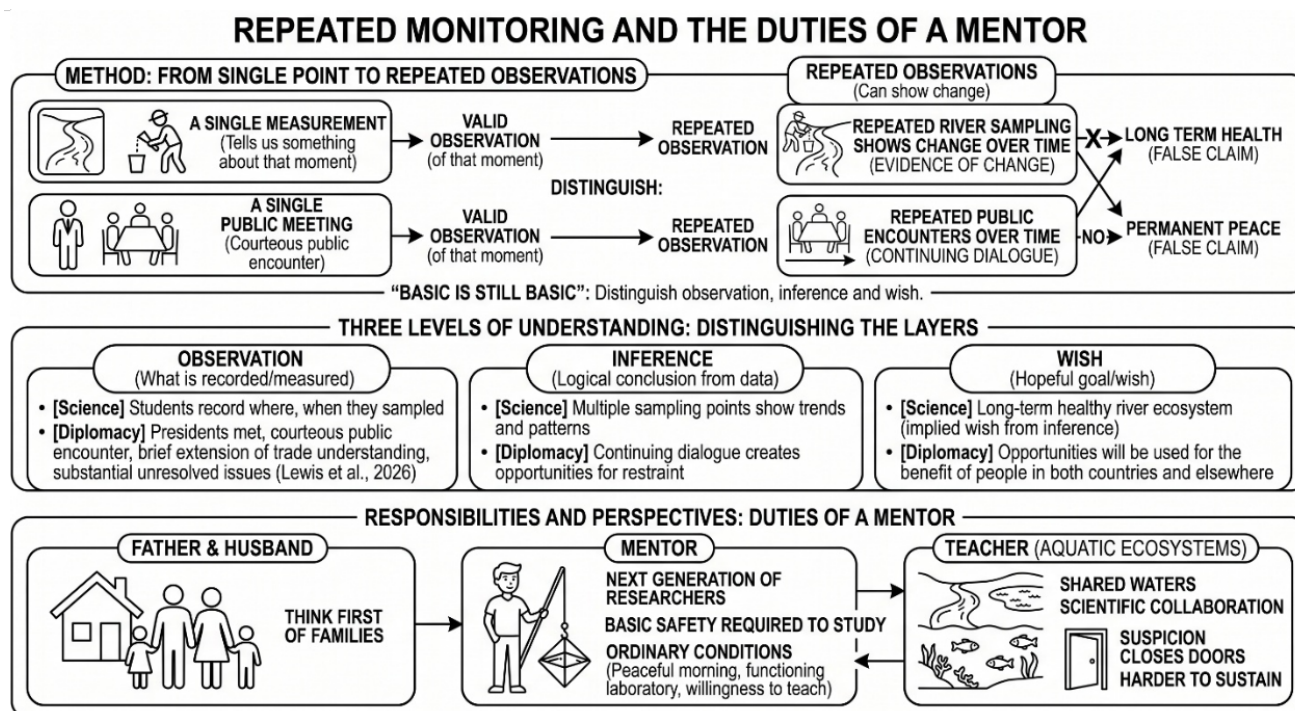


Figure 5 Repeated monitoring and the duties of a mentor: The diagram distinguishes observation, inference and aspiration in scientific and diplomatic interpretation. The diplomatic observation is informed by.⁴ Repeated monitoring is presented as an analogy and does not supply a predictive test of peace.

Conclusion

Sediment sampling seeks evidence of what has settled beneath a visible surface. The diplomatic comparison asks what subsequent decisions will carry into the lives of others. The encounter between Presidents Xi and Trump cannot by itself demonstrate lasting peace. It can, however, provide an opportunity for continued dialogue whose value should be judged through subsequent actions and their consequences.

The literature considered here connects wartime atrocities, environmental pollution and the vulnerability of people caught amid geopolitical conflict. Against that background, Gajah berdamai,

pelanduk boleh bergembira expresses a conditional aspiration for lives downstream. If conversation develops into repeated restraint and practical cooperation, students, families and ecosystems may benefit. Continuing observation is necessary to assess whether that possibility becomes sustained improvement.

Educational responsibility extends to ordinary encounters. Students can listen before judging a disagreement, compete fairly without treating another person as an enemy and examine evidence that challenges an existing belief. These practices are accessible to teachers, researchers, parents and young people even when they cannot negotiate on behalf of nations. Peace can be supported through such habits of attention and respect. The fieldwork image of a researcher

learning to care about what enters the water offers a corresponding ethical lesson: the next generation should consider carefully what its words and actions introduce into the lives of others.

Declaration on the use of artificial intelligence

Generative artificial intelligence tools assisted with language refinement, structural organization and stylistic clarity during manuscript preparation and revision. The original conceptual figures were generated using Google Gemini from concepts supplied by the author. For this revision, the diagrams were reconstructed programmatically with AI assistance to use impersonal wording, consistent numbered citations and clearer distinctions between scientific observations and ethical interpretation. The conceptual framework and scholarly interpretations remain the author's responsibility. The author retains full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality and integrity of the manuscript.

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