

Water as a Strategic Resource and Political Influence in the Modern World

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“Water will be to the 21st century what oil was to the 20th”, - the Fortune Magazine, 15 May, 2000.

Part 1: Global Water Facts

Water is at the centre of some of today’s biggest challenges.

Currently, up to 3 billion people worldwide (~45%) don’t have access to clean water that is safe to drink.¹

Water-related risks cost more than \$US500 billion every year.²

It is projected that by 2025 almost half the world will live under conditions of high water stress.³

About 2.5 billion people (36%) worldwide depend solely on groundwater resources. The use of groundwater has tripled in the past 50 years.⁴

Most Vulnerable Water Resources

Twenty-one of the world’s 37 largest groundwater resources (aquifers) - in locations from India and China to the United States and France – are classified as “overstressed” because they have almost no new water flowing into offset usage.

The Arabian Aquifer System, a key water source for 60 million people in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Qatar, Syria and other countries, is the world’s most overstressed.

The Indus Basin aquifer in north-western India and Pakistan is the second most vulnerable, and the Murzuk-Djado Basin in North Africa (Libya and Niger) is the third.

But the situation with water scarcity is worse in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and North America.

By 2050, there will be about 9 billion people on the Earth. Two-thirds of them will live in regions that lack water. From there, one should expect the main migration flows of refugees to countries with large water resources.⁵ Mass migration to Europe will now be due to a shortage of water in Africa and the Middle East. And they will not run away for benefits, but for water.

¹ The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation (JMP) Report, 2016.

² <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan021709.htm>, accessed 24 July 2018.

³ IFRI and Veolia, 2015. The murky future of global water quality: New global study projects rapid deterioration in water quality, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFRI), Washington, D.C. and Veolia Water North America, Chicago, IL.

⁴ United Nations, Report ‘The World’s Water’, Vol. 8, 2012.

⁵ International Organisation for Migration, 2009, Compendium of IOM’s Activities in Migration, Climate Change and the Environment, IOM, April 2010.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) forecasts, the number of 'water migrants' can reach from 300 million to 1 billion people by 2050, that is, almost the three populations of the United States.⁶

Summary

- Water scarcity is among the many problems which the world will face in the 21st century.
- By 2025, almost half the world will live under conditions of high water stress.

Part 2: Water Scarcity and Water Conflicts

There are more than 250 international river and lake basins in the world, covering more than 45% of the land surface.⁷ In addition, many groundwater aquifers extend beyond national boundaries.

Currently, an increasing number of states are experiencing permanent water stress. Competition over this precious resource could increasingly become a source of tension and even conflicts between states.

Water-related issues are indicated as one of the top five global risks by the World Economic Forum 2017 (WEF) in its annual Global Risks Report in terms of impact over the next decade.⁸

“The wars of the next [twenty-first] century will be about water”, - Ismail Serageldin, the former vice-president of the World Bank.⁹

“Future wars are going to be about water and not about oil”, - Kofi Annan, March 2001.¹⁰

There have been 507 water-related events between nations over the last 50 years. Among them, more than 20 conflicts were armed conflicts.

There are already hundreds and thousands of conflicts at the local level. But mass media do not report this. These are most large-scale examples.

Almost 90% of the conflictive events relate to *water quantity* and *infrastructure*.

The following examples illustrate this.

Israel vs Jordan

Water for Israel is a matter of national security and its strategic potential.

There would be no Jordan River, there would be no state of Israel.

⁶ UNHCR, 2012, 'The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solidarity', available at: www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opensslPDFViewer.html?docid=4fc5ceca9, accessed 12 April 2012.

⁷ Wolf, A. et al. 1999. International River Basins of the World. International Journal of Water Resources Development, vol.15 (4): 387-427.

⁸ The World Economic Forum: Global Risks Report 2017; <http://reportd.weforum.org/global-risks-2017/>

⁹ Quoted in New York Times, 10 August 1995; see also <https://www.goldismoney2.com/threads/this-is-war.147201/page-2>

¹⁰ <https://newyorkessays.com/essay-water-as-a-source-of-future-conflict-in-sa/>

There are at least two Israeli armies on the Golan Heights which are fighting for the Jordan River water.

Israel vs Palestine

Damages to water infrastructures that served Palestinian towns by the Israeli military in Salfeet in the autumn of 2000 and in Nablus and Ramallah in 2002, and to wells in Gaza in 2003, to name but a few examples.

Israel vs Syria

Israel justifies its claims to Syria solely on national security issues by masquerading its interest in water resources in Syria. But the whole history of the conflict between Israel and Syria is a pure war for water.

The Golan Heights is a source of 50% of the region's water. There is no other source of water for Israel, only the Jordan River, while Syria has such sources.

Israel secured control over its freshwater supplies at the expense of Syrian water.

Therefore, in this region there may be more conflicts for the right to own water resources. If Israel loses in these conflicts, it will be the end of the state of Israel - it will cease to exist.

Libya

In 1953, Libya discovered the giant aquifer system known as the Nubian Sandstone Aquifer System – the world's largest 600m-deep aquifer – crosses into the territory of Egypt, Chad, and Sudan.

Under President Muammar Gaddafi's leadership Libya has built a \$25 billion the *Great Man-made River Project* (GMR project), the world's largest irrigation project to bring clean accessible water through the Sahara desert to the entire nation.

Thanks to NATO's 'humanitarian' war in Libya (2011), the GMR project's future is in great peril, and the water supply infrastructure is destroyed, and now people have no regular access to water.

India vs Pakistan

The water conflict between India and Pakistan is concentrated on the Indus River which flows from India to Pakistan. Pakistan is concerned that India may stop supplying water from the Indus River and its tributaries. Pakistan considers this as a 'water terrorism'.

When India began to build water dams (2008) a wave of real terrorist attacks swept across India (2008-2016).

Syria and Iraq

Turkey blocked the Euphrates River several times which is the only source that provides drinking water to the inhabitants of the provinces of Aleppo, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor (Syria) during 2011 until now.

In 2014, extremists of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) cut water flow through a dam upstream from Ramadi to weaken the Iraqi resistance, - five cities with 15 million inhabitants lost access to water.

In 2015, the water supply to Damascus was cut off by the Syrian rebel forces.

In 2017, ISIS flooded villages they control in the East Aleppo by pumping water from Lake Assad into the Al-Jar channel.

Central Asian Region

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan.

The Central Asian crisis is unique in its own way. Firstly, it is not related to the water deficit in the region, but to the uneven distribution of water resources between the highlands and the plains.

Secondly, here, not wealthy countries manipulate the poor, but rather vice versa. Oil-rich and gas-rich Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan largely depend on the poor mountainous countries of Tadzhikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

These states make claims to each other, accusing them of 'water terrorism'.

The main reasons of ethnic conflicts in 1989 and 1990 between Uzbeks and Kirghiz in the Fergana Valley (Uzbekistan) were disputes over irrigated lands for ownership of water sources and for its use. More 500 people were killed, up to 70% of all houses were burned.

The Crimea

Here, water becomes a weapon of blackmail and political pressure when Ukraine made water its formidable weapon against The Crimea.

After the reunification of The Crimea with Russia in 2014, Kiev immediately closed the gateways of the North Crimean water channel – the source of 85% of freshwater to the Crimea from Ukraine.

As a consequence, irrigated agricultural lands in The Crimea decreased by 10 times, and Ukraine itself lost cheap food supplies from The Crimea.

Kiev made 3 terrorist attempt attacks in 2014, - tried to poison water catchment reservoirs in The Crimea.

The Crimea was ready to pay for water to Kiev, but Kiev began to dump water into the Black Sea and the Black Sea waters began to desalinate. This resulted in the bankruptcy of fishing enterprises in Ukraine itself.

USA vs Canada

In the mid of 2000s, the water level in the Great Lakes reached a critical historical minimum.

This has led to an increased water pollution, lessening the profitability of industrial production in the North of the USA.

In 2006, dozens of US army garrisons have been placed “all for peaceful training” along the Great lakes coast, and the United States organized the armed protection of the Great Lakes by coastal water vessels on the border with its ally, Canada. The reason of this is that fresh water resources and water related issues are critical for the US national security.

Canada does not accept and like this, because by law the USA and Canadian border water resources are in joint use.

Europe

The most large-scale problems may arise in Southern Europe - in the Mediterranean region, where water scarcity is already a problem.

Similar situation with freshwater in Spain and Italy which will be experienced soon with acute lack of clean water.

The Middle and South of Italy are already experiencing a seasonal water shortage, and the North Italy with its Lake Coma – the Europe’s third largest water reservoir which has enough water for the whole region - does not want to supply its water to dawn regions.

In the Northern Italy, which is rich of water resources, a separatist movement ‘League of the North’ is gaining power for the separation of this region from the Middle and South Italy.

The Lake Baikal

The Lake Baikal is a reservoir with the purest drinking-water already attracts the attention of world politicians. They say, - Baikal as a unique lake is a world heritage but not only of Russia, and the whole world is responsible for its destiny.

Brzezinski once said, - “This is not fair, when about half of the world's water resources are located in Russia. And Russia should not dispose of them solely”.

The list goes-on and on.

Summary

- Water scarcity should be regarded as a threat to security – within not only vulnerable states but also the world’s major economic and military powers.
- Water resources have become a ‘weapon of sovereignty’ for many states.
- There is a danger of conflicts over water resources at the regional and international level.

Part 3: Hydro-politics - Establishing World Control Over Water Resources

In 2011, Hillary Clinton, as the US Secretary of State, commissioned a report from the US intelligence services entitled 'Global Water Security'. The report made the following statements:

- water insecurity in the world in the next 10 years will increase, and
- water will be used as a lever of pressure and weapons.

Surprisingly in this report, US intelligence analysts do not talk about their water resources, but about the Nile (Egypt), Amu-Darya River (Russia), the Great Lakes (Canada) etc., which are not on their (USA) territory, but in other countries.

During the 20th century and beyond oil made billions of profit for multi-national corporations, and now water has similar potential for hungry profit-makers of the world.

The control over a water tap is no less geopolitically important than the control over an oil-bearing area. “Water is the new oil”, - Thomas B. Pickens Jr., an American business magnate and financier, chairs the hedge fund BP Capital Management.

About 34% of the world’s drinking-water has been privatised.

Currently, about 550 million people worldwide (9%) are already receiving water from the private providers at a market price.

Establishing world control over water resources and their privatisation will result in a building ‘*A New Global Water Architecture*’.

To achieve further privatization of water with the ultimate goal - the creation of the world water market, the popularizers of this idea use the classical scheme of ‘active measures’.

‘*Active measures*’ – this is an activity of interested party (e.g. secret service, intelligence, government, financial group, lobby, etc.), which is aimed at a ‘*target audience*’ (an object it wants to influence), and is carried out at the request of an ‘*interested party*’ with ‘*supporters*’ (e.g. agents of influence, third party, etc.) and ‘*auxiliary means*’ (e.g. mass media, etc.) to reach required, ‘*planned impacts*’.

The campaign (‘active measures’) begins with aggressive propaganda in mass-media such as e.g.

- “We urgently need a consensus on a ‘good enough’ global water architecture”, and supporters e.g.
- “Water is not a human right but a product that needs to be sold and bought”, - Nestle Chairman Peter Brabeck-Letmathe;¹¹
- “Water has moved from being an endless commodity that may be taken for granted to a rationed necessity that may be taken by force”, - Canadian water company Global Water Corp.¹²

For example, in 2007, the United Nations Environment Programme’s sub-programme ‘The Water for Revenue’ encouraged water to be a privately owned business.¹³

The World Bank also implemented a strategy for privatizing water.¹⁴

¹¹ Nestle CEO. Water is not a human right, should be privatised, posted 26 April, 2013; <http://www.trueactivist.com/nestle-ceo-water-is-not-a-human-right-should-be-privitised/>

¹² Maude Barlow, Water Incorporated, *Earth Island Journal*, March 5, 2002; Global Policy Forum, <http://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/162/28041.html>

¹³ UNEP Water Policy and Strategy, <https://www.scribd.com/document/255634201/Water-Policy-and-Strategy-of-UNEP>

¹⁴ Water Resources Sector Strategy: Strategic Direction for World Bank Engagement, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water>

In practical application, this means that both the World Bank and the United Nations want to fasten the water sources, allowing them to be used as *means of power*. And once they entirely regulate these means, those means become financial assets, only to be sold back with a price tag.

Where most people see a humanitarian crisis, corporations see enormous profits.

Multi-national corporations are trying to increase their control over water by: (1) privatising water services; (2) reducing the ability of governments to regulate corporate activity; and (3) exporting water to sell for a profit.

The environmental market was created in 1980s. That means that government environmental agencies in many countries justified destruction of nature via ‘environmental certificates’ e.g. resource consents.

How the ‘*world water market*’ is creating?

Let’s consider a few examples.

In early 2000s, the UN General Assembly proclaimed the period from 2005 to 2015 as the international decade for action ‘Water for Life’ which sounds neutral and humanitarian.¹⁵

As this decade ended, other initiatives have been immediately initiated to continue trying to get water to private hands, - i.e. OECD Water Principles on Water Governance, December 2016, which were developed within the OECD Water Governance Initiative and welcomed by Ministers at the 3-4 June 2015 Ministerial Council Meeting.

Then (2016) the OECD Council issued ‘Recommendation on Water Guidance: Principles on Water Governance and our Roundtable on Financing Water’, and put these recommendations at the disposal of OECD Members and non-Members alike.¹⁶

The OECD Council’s recommendations to the OECD Members and Partners include the following actions:

“Members and Partners should:

- Set abstraction charges for surface and ground water.
- Set tariffs or charges for water services and [...] renewal costs of [water systems] infrastructure [...], where possible.
- Combine revenues from water tariffs, transfers from public budgets and transfers from the international community to recover the costs of investment, operation and maintenance of water infrastructure as much as possible and where efficient.
- Consider establishing pricing instruments appropriate and applicable.”

That is, in fact - the global privatization of water, according to the principle – ‘who gets something, he pays for it!’

In 2017, Mr. Angel Gurría, Secretary-General of the OECD, reinforced this matter and delivered the following remarks at the event ‘Prioritising Water on the Global Agenda’, hosted by the UN Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 24 April 2017:

¹⁵ International Decade for Action ‘Water for Life’ 2005-2015, <http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/>

¹⁶ OECD Council Recommendations on Water, December 2016.

- “water does not keep enough on the political agenda;
- “we have failed to secure financial commensurate with the [water governance] challenges we face”; and similar others.¹⁷

Mr. Angel Gurría also proposed “push our boundaries [regarding inland water systems] further”, and to build ‘*A New Global Water Architecture*’ with three key elements such as:

- an establishing a global strategic political leadership over water resources;
- any approach to water must be coherent across geographical scales;
- global water architecture should also need to embed water concerns more effectively.¹⁸

Paraphrasing Mr Angel Gurría’s statements, we can assume that he calls for the creation of a body like, for example, ARAMCO, which controls the extraction and sale of oil.

That is, in fact, to establish a global control over water resources, to give water the same commercial status as oil that is to commercialize water and privatize water on an international scale.

Case-study: Privatisation of Irish Water

The commercialisation of water and the setting up of the private Irish Water company (in 2012-2014) has been a big problem from the very beginning, as it has created a costly burden on Irish public funds and caused huge anger among the Irish people.¹⁹

People who can’t pay their water bills will be left without running water.

The Irish people call on the Irish government stop the privatisation of Ireland’s water which is a natural resource, saying that the government does not have a mandate to sell off any natural resources which belong to the Irish state and therefore it’s people.

The Irish opposition parties want to amend Article 10 of the Irish Constitution which deals with ownership of natural resources to state that “...*the State shall not provide for the privatisation or commercialisation of water services for the people.*”

Part 4: Sovereignty over Water Resources - Upstream vs Downstream Hydro-hegemony

International Water Law

Currently, more than 250 river basins are transboundary and they are subject to hundreds of agreements. Some countries fall completely within transboundary basins.

The existing international water law does not counter and prevent hydro-hegemony.

This is only one universal treaty dealing with the use of transboundary freshwater resources: *The 1997 UN Convention on the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses* (1997 Watercourses Convention).²⁰

¹⁷ Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General, New York, 24 April 2017; <http://www.oecd.org/water/putting-water-at-the-centre-of-the-global-agenda-remarks-a-gurries.htm>

¹⁸ Transforming Our World: The 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development; <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

¹⁹ Stop the privatisation of Irish Water; <http://campaigns.350.org/petitions/stop-the-privatisation-of-irish-water>

²⁰ Transboundary Water Law, <http://transboundarywaterlaw.com/publications.html>

It established two key principles to guide the conduct of nations regarding shared watercourses: "equitable and reasonable use" and "the obligation not to cause significant harm" to neighbours. However, it is up to countries themselves to spell out precisely what these terms mean in their watersheds.

Although all UN states can join the 1997 Watercourses Convention, it has only 36 parties to it, mostly downstream countries. No major upper riparian states or countries claiming historical water rights in stressed transboundary water regions of the world have ratified the Convention; they clearly wish to retain their sovereign rights over their river basins.

To implement and further develop The 1997 Watercourses Convention, such a process needs a champion.

I think that international collaboration requires some country, organisation or well-respectable person to lead the process.

A possible leader could be an independent international NGO (i.e. Switzerland-based) that wishes to promote sustainable global free-water-for-all governance and to prevent potential water conflicts.

Summary

- Water is a new political factor.
- Water is becoming a new commodity – a commercial value.
- The control over the water tap is no less geopolitically important than the control over the oil-bearing area.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions:

1. The main natural resource of the 21st century is water.
2. A future regional and global security is supposed will depend on access to water resources.
3. Water will become the most common cause of war conflicts in the 21st century.
4. Water resources and control over them is one of the critical components of the future geopolitical stability.
5. Increasing water scarcity and the threat of water conflicts may lead to a potential shift in the geopolitical landscape, particularly to advantage of countries with an immense amount of water resource potential such as Russia (in Eurasia), Switzerland (in Europe), Canada (in North America), New Zealand (in South-Pacific).
6. Interstate conflicts because of cross-border water scarcity, are most likely will occur in Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and North-Eastern Africa, regions where limited water resources are shared across borders and political stability is transient.

Recommendations:

1. A new model of international governance is needed that de-politicises water governance and directly involves citizen-users in policy change e.g. NGOs like 'Mut zur Ethik', Switzerland
2. This requires awareness campaigns about the risks of water vulnerability e.g. in 'Current Concerns' / 'Zeit-Fragen' publications / 'Mut zur Ethik' forums, etc.
3. However, the two above-proposed steps are insufficient without political will. It is imperative that global leaders publicly acknowledge and address the water-security and water-free-of-charge nexus in the coming years.