

WATER WARS: OBSCURING OPPORTUNITIES

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Speaking at the 2008 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon weighed in on water conflict:

The challenge of securing safe and plentiful water for all is one of the most daunting challenges faced by the world today... Too often, where we need water, we find guns instead. Population growth will make the problem worse. So will climate change. As the global economy grows, so will its thirst. Many more conflicts lie just over the horizon.¹

Ban's water wars warning served to bring water to the attention of a diverse and powerful audience. Yet there is a real danger that by imprecisely stating—or overstating—the likelihood of water conflict, this argument could undercut opportunities that water offers for cooperation.

His prediction is not unique. We are constantly bombarded with heated predictions of coming water wars: newspaper headlines trumpet the possibility, advocates warn against it, and politicians confidently predict the next war will be over water, not oil.² Truly dire statistics on declining amounts of water available for human consumption reinforce a deep pessimism over the future of water.

Yet if we move beyond surface-level arguments, we find a decidedly more mixed story. There is considerable conflict over water, but it is not necessarily where politicians, journalists or advocates suggest we should expect it. Countries have historically been quick to rattle their sabers over water, but they have nevertheless been content to keep them sheathed. One hears of few—if any—actual cases of wars being fought over water.³ Instead, evidence from systematic assessments of bilateral and multilateral interactions over water suggests a cooperative narrative is more accurate than a violent one.⁴ Successful cooperation within many transboundary river basins has become a powerful counter-story to the ubiquitous water wars prediction.

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At the same time, it would be wrong to conclude that water does not precipitate conflict simply because states have not fought full-fledged wars over it in the past. If we move beyond the classic realist focus on states to analyze conflict at the subnational level, we find extensive violence surrounding water. While it does not involve armies on the move, these conflicts carry high stakes—and life and death consequences—for those involved. Conflicts over the pricing of water, large mega-projects such as dams, competing sectoral water uses and limited supplies within sectors have engendered a long record of violent, if not always large-scale or deadly, conflict.

As Ban highlighted, in the coming years, population growth, expanding agricultural production, increased consumption levels and climate change will give rise to an unprecedented scarcity of safe water. At the same time, as nations become increasingly dependent on each other for food and other goods and services, the need to cooperate will become even more imperative. Hence, the challenge for scholars and practitioners alike is to differentiate between the various dynamics that can lead to conflict over water and find ways to capitalize on the range of opportunities for cooperation.

Addressing the history of water conflict and expanding opportunities for cooperation requires that we unpack the distinctions among different levels of analysis and accompanying evidence. To do so, we delve into the historical evidence for water wars and find it absent.⁵ To the contrary, we find the case for cooperation around water to be compelling at the transboundary level. Yet within states there is considerable conflict over water. These conflicts are diverse in nature and manifestation but present a more accurate picture of water conflict. The future of transboundary water conflict may not look like the past, given the severe and deteriorating conditions for water quality and quantity, which are pushing states and peoples into unprecedented territory. Therefore, we leave open the possibility for future conflict. We conclude with an appeal for recognizing the distinctions between conflict over water and the equally strong story for cooperation as a means to capture opportunities and address threats at all levels.

THE REALITY OF WATER WARS

Over the past two decades, scholars have undertaken extensive analyses of transboundary water-related disputes. Wolf, Yoffe and Giordano carried out a historical assessment of transboundary water conflicts and found that of the 1,831 state-to-state water-related events that took place between 1946 and 1999, only thirty-seven were violent, and thirty of those were between Israel and one of its neighbors prior to 1971.⁶ Fully 414 of the 507 conflictual, but not necessarily violent, cases could be classified as “rhetorical hostility.” Although state leaders have engaged in considerable posturing over water, they have not escalated conflicts to formal levels of war between states. In fact, the landmark study of Wolf, Yoffe and Giordano found that water has never motivated a modern war between two nations. Where water does