

Hydropolitics in the Third World



HYDROPOLITICS IN THE THIRD WORLD

Conflict and Cooperation
in International River Basins

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*Rivers have a perverse habit of wandering across borders . . .
and nation states have a perverse habit of treating whatever
portion of them flows within their borders as a national re-
source at their sovereign disposal.*

— John Waterbury, *Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley*
(1979)

It is space, not time, that hides consequences from us.

— John Berger, *The Look of Things* (1972)



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FOREWORD

As nature's fundamental environmental resource, water tends to attract attention—when there's too much of it, or too little. Accustomed as we are in the urbanized Western world to a more or less reliable and plentiful supply, we pay scant regard to the quantity of water available to us. And although water sometimes figures as an important issue in local or regional politics, in the developed world it rarely plays a significant role in international politics.

Such inattention to water is unthinkable in large parts of the world. Especially in many developing countries, obtaining a safe and sufficient supply of water is a daily necessity for vast numbers of people and an abiding ambition for their governments. Sufficiency of supply is, moreover, a growing concern, for as the size of populations increases and the pace of industrialization quickens in the developing world, so the demand for freshwater intensifies and the already scarce supplies become all the more valuable. Acutely conscious of the manifold dangers that water shortages pose to their countries and peoples, governments jealously guard their existing freshwater supplies while trying to find new sources to exploit.

Like governments everywhere, the first instinct of Third World governments is to act unilaterally: to decide for themselves how, when, and where they will exploit their freshwater resources. But, as *Hydropolitics in the Third World* makes abundantly clear, unilateralism and water don't mix—especially when “most remaining major exploitable sources of freshwater are now in river basins that are shared by two or more sovereign states.”

International river basins cover between 60 and 65 percent of the continents of Asia, Africa, and South America. Africa alone has more than fifty basins that are shared by two or more states. Consequently, when a developing country looks to alleviate its present or prospective water shortages by making more or better use of the water in its rivers, the chances are that those rivers also pass through a number of other countries. And those countries will almost certainly be concerned about actions by an upstream riparian neighbor that reduce the quantity or quality of the water in the shared rivers.

Thus, according to many observers, the stage is set in the Third World for impending “water wars”—for violent conflicts driven by the search for secure and sufficient supplies of freshwater. Some commentators, indeed, go so far as to suggest that such conflicts have already occurred, as in the case of Israel’s wars with its neighbors, or tensions between Turkey and Syria. There is no doubt that water figures prominently as a strategic concern for virtually all the states of the Middle East, and that long-term peace in the region will remain a chimera until agreement has been reached on the allocation of its scarce water resources.

Predicting the political consequences of environmental changes—for example, global warming—or of changing demands on the environment—as in the case of water resources—is an activity that seems to invite alarmism. It is not uncommon for worst-case scenarios to be presented as though they were most-likely scenarios, with the paradoxical result that interest in the problem tends to quickly dissipate as publics and politicians soon weary of predictions of imminent catastrophes that fail to materialize. One of the great virtues of *Hydropolitics in the Third World* is that it avoids alarmism in favor of a balanced, thoughtful consideration of the risks of hydropolitical conflicts escalating into violence. That said, Arun Elhance certainly does not make light of the dangers. The conclusion to this book—drawing on case studies of the Paraná-La Plata, Nile, Jordan, Euphrates-Tigris, Ganges-Brahmaputra-Barak, and Mekong basins—lays out a daunting array of “grounds for despair,” reasons why acute conflict may occur.

Yet Elhance does not exaggerate the dangers. And the conclusion also presents a set of “reasons for hope”—a number of factors that can justly inspire hydropolitical optimism. Among these is perhaps this study’s most remarkable, and certainly its most encouraging, finding: “Although sovereign states are inherently inclined to exploit ‘their’ water resources unilaterally, in the end even the strongest riparian states sharing international basins are compelled to seek some form of cooperation with their weaker

neighbors." Sooner or later, argues Elhance, the inescapable interdependencies among riparian states and the costs of noncooperation make cooperation inevitable. The shortcomings of unilateral action spur bilateral cooperation, which then tends to expand into multilateral efforts to make more productive and equitable use of the waters of shared rivers.

This embrace of multilateralism is by no means the end of the story, however. Numerous political, geographic, technical, and other obstacles must be overcome if a readiness to cooperate is actually to yield positive, tangible rewards. Here, the author notes, is where third parties can play critical roles, applying political pressure and supplying economic and technical support to help developing countries cooperate effectively. One of the stated aims of this book is to help in this process by enabling the international community to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the highly complex field of hydro politics. It is an aim that, by dint of the breadth, depth, and even-handedness of the author's study, he has plainly achieved.

Arun Elhance was a fellow in the Jennings Randolph Program at the United States Institute of Peace in 1991–92, and his concern to provide a balanced perspective, reliable information, and analyses that are stimulating for scholars and useful for policymakers harmonizes perfectly with the broad aims of the Institute. In funding and publishing the results of research into the sources of international conflicts and the means by which they may be peacefully managed or resolved, the Institute seeks to help equip the academic and policymaking communities, and the interested public, with the informational and analytical tools with which to construct a more peaceful world. With its emphasis on geography and natural resources, *Hydro politics in the Third World* adds a new facet to the Institute's published works, along with a variety of other projects examining the relationship between environmental issues and conflict management supported by our Grant Program.

One hopes that the "guarded optimism" for hydro political cooperation with which the author concludes this book is well placed. To facilitate such a future, the Institute will continue to support and disseminate wide-ranging, balanced, and policy-relevant research into the possibilities for international cooperation—hydro political and otherwise—to overcome the dangers of violent conflict.

Richard H. Solomon, President
United States Institute of Peace



PREFACE

Hydropolitics in international river basins is a very complex, multi-dimensional, and multidisciplinary subject. If the international community is to help prevent the emergence of acute conflicts among the states and peoples sharing transboundary water resources, it needs to acquire a much more sophisticated understanding of hydropolitics. I hope that this book will help to enhance such understanding. The book reflects a growing conviction that the attainment of sustainable economic development, environmental well-being, human security, and human rights in large parts of the world is not possible without cooperation among states and peoples that share major river basins.

I am grateful to the United States Institute of Peace for the award of a 1991–92 Jennings Randolph Peace Fellowship. The fellowship enabled me to spend a year at the Institute, away from the academic environment but in the company of some of the most distinguished international scholars and thinkers. I am very fortunate to have had the opportunity to interact with and learn from the Distinguished Fellows and Peace Fellows who were at the Institute during the tenure of my fellowship. In alphabetical order they are Muhammad Faour, Alexander George, David Little, Don Peretz, Indarjit Rikhye, Walt Rostow, Robert Rothstein, Shimon Shamir, and Louis Sohn. I am thankful for their critical but highly constructive observations and comments.

In writing this book I have relied heavily on the works of numerous scholars and journalists. The notes to this book indicate my indebtedness; however, there may be occasions on which I have not fully referenced works

on which I have drawn, and in these instances I wish to apologize to the authors involved for my oversight. In a very real sense, this book is a collective endeavor.

The project could not have been completed without the oversight and encouragement of several individuals associated with the Institute; in particular, I would like to thank Ambassador Samuel Lewis, Charles Nelson, Michael Lund, Joseph Klaitz, Barbara Cullicott, David Smock, Otto Koester, Scott Thompson, and Hrach Gregorian. The book would not have seen the light of day without the editorial guidance and support of Nigel Quinney and Dan Snodderly, who have seen me through many dark patches. Research assistance provided by Tim McInnis during the fellowship was invaluable. I hope that the library and administrative staff at the Institute, whom I do not mention individually, will also recognize the contributions that they have made to this endeavor. I am indebted to my wife, Yunae Yi, for her unwavering faith and patience, and to my son, Ajit Yi Elhance, for his delightful companionship. The book is dedicated to my parents, Sri Gyan Prakash and Shrimati Malati Devi, and to the memory of my uncle, Professor D. N. Elhance.

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