

The World Is Facing a Global Water Crisis

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The three water crises—dwindling freshwater supplies, inequitable access to water and the corporate control of water—pose the greatest threat of our time to the planet and to our survival. Together with impending climate change from fossil fuel emissions, the water crises impose some life-or-death decisions on us all. Unless we collectively change our behavior, we are heading toward a world of deepening conflict and potential wars over the dwindling supplies of freshwater—between nations, between rich and poor, between the public and the private interest, between rural and urban populations, and between the competing needs of the natural world and industrialized humans.

Water Is Becoming a Growing Source of Conflict Between Countries

Around the world, more than 215 major rivers and 300 groundwater basins and aquifers are shared by two or more countries, creating tensions over ownership and use of the precious waters they contain. Growing shortages and unequal distribution of water are causing disagreements, sometimes violent, and becoming a security risk in many regions. Britain's former defense secretary, John Reid, warns of coming "water wars." In a public statement on the eve of a 2006 summit on climate change, Reid predicted that violence and political conflict would become more likely as watersheds turn to deserts, glaciers melt and water supplies are poisoned. He went so far as to say that the global water crisis was becoming a global security issue and that Britain's armed forces should be prepared to tackle conflicts, including warfare, over dwindling water sources. "Such changes make the emergence of violent conflict more, rather than less, likely," former British prime minister Tony Blair told *The Independent*. "The blunt truth is that the lack of water and agricultural land is a significant contributory factor to the tragic conflict we see unfolding in Darfur. We should see this as a warning sign."

The Independent gave several other examples of regions of potential conflict. These include Israel, Jordan and Palestine, who all rely on the Jordan River, which is controlled by Israel; Turkey and Syria, where Turkish plans to build dams on the Euphrates River brought the country to the brink of war with Syria in 1998, and where Syria now accuses Turkey of deliberately meddling with its water supply; China and India, where the Brahmaputra River has caused tension between the two countries in the past, and where China's proposal to divert the river is re-igniting the divisions; Angola, Botswana and Namibia, where disputes over the Okavango water basin that have flared in the past are now threatening to re-ignite as Namibia is proposing to build a three hundred-kilometer pipeline that will drain the delta; Ethiopia and Egypt, where population growth is threatening conflict along the Nile; and Bangladesh and India, where flooding in the Ganges caused by melting glaciers in the Himalayas is wreaking havoc in Bangladesh, leading to a rise in illegal, and unpopular, migration to India.

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the United States.

While not likely to lead to armed conflict, stresses are growing along the U.S.-Canadian border over shared boundary waters. In particular, concerns are growing over the future of the Great Lakes, whose waters are becoming increasingly polluted and whose water tables are being steadily drawn down by the huge buildup of population and industry around the basin. A joint commission set up to oversee these waters was recently bypassed by the governors of the American states bordering the Great Lakes, who passed an amendment to the treaty governing the lakes that allows for water diversions to new communities off the basin on the American side. Canadian protests fell on deaf ears in Washington. In 2006, the U.S. government announced plans to have the U.S. coast guard patrol the Great Lakes using machine guns mounted on their vessels and revealed that it had created thirty-four permanent live-fire training zones along the Great Lakes from where it had already conducted a number of automatic weapons drills due to fierce opposition, firing three thousand lead bullets each time into the lakes. The Bush administration has temporarily called off these drills but is already asserting U.S. authority over what has in the past been considered joint waters.

Similar trouble is brewing on the U.S.-Mexican border, where a private group of U.S.-based water rights holders is using the North American Free Trade Agreement to challenge the long-term practice by Mexican farmers to divert water from the Rio Grande before it reaches the United States.

U.S. energy interests in the Middle East could be threatened by water conflicts in the region.

Water Is Becoming a Global Security Issue: The United States

Water has recently (and suddenly) become a key strategic security and foreign policy priority for the United States. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9-11, protection of U.S. waterways and drinking water supplies from terrorist attack became vitally important to the White House. When Congress created the Department of Homeland Security in 2002, it gave the department responsibility for securing the nation's water infrastructure and allocated US\$548 million in appropriations for security of water infrastructure facilities, funding that was increased in subsequent years. The Environmental Protection Agency created a National Homeland Security Research Center to develop the scientific foundations and tools to be used in the event of an attack on the nation's water systems, and a Water Security Division was established to train water utility personnel on security issues. It also created a Water Information Sharing and Analysis Center for dissemination of alerts about potential threats to drinking water and, with the American Water Works Association, a rapid e-mail notification system for professionals called the Water Security Channel. Ever true to market economy ideology, the Department of Homeland Security's mandate includes promoting public-private partnerships in protecting the nation's water security.

But the interest in water did not stop there. Water is becoming as important a strategic issue as energy in Washington. In an August 2004 briefing note for the Institute for the Analysis of Global Security, a think tank that focuses on the link between energy and security, Dr. Allan R. Hoffman, a senior analyst for the U.S. Department of Energy, declared that the energy security of the United States actually depends on the state of its water resources and warns of a growing water-security crisis worldwide. "Just as energy security became a national priority in the period following the Arab Oil Embargo of 1973-74, water security

is destined to become a national and global priority in the decades ahead," says Hoffman. He notes that central to addressing water security issues is finding the energy to extract water from underground aquifers, transport water through pipelines and canals, manage and treat water for reuse and desalinate brackish and sea water—all technologies now being promoted by U.S. government partnerships with American companies. He also points out that the U.S. energy interests in the Middle East could be threatened by water conflicts in the region: "Water conflicts add to the instability of a region on which the U.S. depends heavily for oil.

"Continuation or inflammation of these conflicts could subject U.S. energy supplies to blackmail again, as occurred in the 1970s." Water shortages and global warming pose a "serious threat" to America's national security, top retired military leaders told the president in an April 2007 report published by the national security think tank CNA Corporation. Six retired admirals and five retired generals warned of a future of rampant water wars into which the United States will be dragged. Erik Peterson, director of the Global Strategy Institute of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a research organization in Washington that calls itself a "strategic planning partner for the government," says that the United States must make water a top priority in foreign policy. "There is a very, very critical dimension to all these global water problems here at home," he told *Voice of America News*. "The first is that it's in our national interest to see stability and security and economic development in key areas of the world, and water is a big factor with that whole set of challenges." His center has joined forces with ITT Industries, the giant water technology company; Proctor & Gamble, which has created a home water purifier called PUR and is working with the UN in a joint public-private venture in developing countries; Coca-Cola; and Sandia National Laboratories to launch a joint-research institute called Global Water Futures (GWF). Sandia, whose motto is "securing a peaceful and free world through technology" and that works to "maintain U.S. military and nuclear superiority," is contracted out to weapons manufacturer Lockheed Martin by the U.S. government, to operate, thus linking water security to military security in a direct way.

The mandate of Global Water Futures is twofold: to affect U.S. strategy and policy regarding the global water crisis and to develop the technology necessary to advance the solution. In a September 2005 report, Global Water Futures warned that the global water crisis is driving the world toward "a tipping point in human history," and elaborated on the need for the United States to start taking water security more seriously: "In light of the global trends in water, it is clear that water quality and water management will affect almost every major U.S. strategic priority in every key region of the world. Addressing the world's water needs will go well beyond humanitarian and economic development interests.... Policies focused on water in regions across the planet must be regarded as a critical element in U.S. national security strategy. Such policies should be part of a broader, comprehensive, and integrated U.S. strategy toward the global water challenges."

Humanity still has a chance to head off these scenarios of conflict and war. We could start with a global covenant on water.

Innovations in policy and technology must be tightly linked, says the report, no doubt music to the ears of the corporations that sponsored it. GWF calls for closer innovation and cooperation between governments and the private sector and "redoubled" efforts to mobilize public-private partnerships in the development of technological solutions. And, in language that will be familiar to critics of the Bush administration who argue that the United States is not in Iraq to promote democracy, but rather to secure oil resources and make huge profits for American companies in the "rebuilding" effort, the report links upholding American values of democracy with the profit to be gained in the process: "Water issues are critical to U.S. national

security and integral to upholding American values of humanitarianism and democratic development. Moreover, engagement with international water issues guarantees business opportunity for the U.S. private sector, which is well positioned to contribute to development and reap economic reward." Listed among the U.S. government agencies engaged in water issues in the report is the Department of Commerce, which "facilitates U.S. water businesses and market research, and improves U.S. competitiveness in the international water market."

Blue Covenant: The Alternative Water Future

Humanity still has a chance to head off these scenarios of conflict and war. We could start with a global covenant on water. The Blue Covenant should have three components: a water conservation covenant from people and their governments that recognizes the right of the Earth and of other species to clean water, and pledges to protect and conserve the world's water supplies; a water justice covenant between those in the global North who have water and resources and those in the global South who do not, to work in solidarity for water justice, water for all and local control of water; and a water democracy covenant among all governments acknowledging that water is a fundamental human right for all. Therefore, governments are required not only to provide clean water to their citizens as a public service, but they must also recognize that citizens of other countries have the right to water as well and to find peaceful solutions to water disputes between states.

A good example of this is the Good Water Makes Good Neighbors project of Friends of the Earth Middle East, which seeks to use shared water and the notion of water justice to negotiate a wider peace accord in the region. Another example is the successful restoration of the beautiful Lake Constance by Germany, Austria, Lichtenstein and Switzerland, the four countries that share it.

The Blue Covenant should also form the heart of a new covenant on the right to water to be adopted both in nation-state constitutions and in international law at the United Nations. To create the conditions for this covenant will require a concerted and collective international collaboration and will have to tackle all three water crises together with the alternatives: Water Conservation, Water Justice, and Water Democracy.

Further Readings

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