

## **“Water Politics and Regional Stability” Proposal for an International Workshop**

The competition for water is a transnational non-traditional security issue that has serious repercussions on regional stability. Rivers are particularly contentious, as they meander across political boundaries, and hence, are subject to competing interests. Nation states, in particular, see themselves as sole proprietors of the portion of the river that flows through their territory; rivers are regarded as a national resource that states have sovereign rights to utilise as they deem appropriate for their self-interests. Water diversions and dam constructions are usually the two most common sources of tension and conflict among riparians. In most cases, the consequences of usage are felt downstream in the form of water shortages and deteriorating water quality. A potential ultimate outcome could be war. Cutting off the war supply of a country, for instance, is often regarded as a *casus belli*. Despite the salience and relevance of hydropolitics to regional stability, there are few systematic and comparative studies of how the competition for water affects the relationship between riparian states and the consequent implications on stability in different geographical regions of the world. The Centre on Asia and Globalisation proposes to convene a workshop to study the impact of water conflicts on regional stability. It is the first phase of a long-term institutionalized project to study the impact of resource competition and environmental issues on regional stability.

Harold Lasswell in his book, *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How*, states that “the study of politics is the study of influence and the influential”, and “the influential are those who get the most of what there is to get” (Lasswell, 1950). In other words, politics is about power manifested in the ability to influence the allocation and distribution of scarce resources. The politics surrounding the allocation of scarce water resources clearly illustrates Lasswell’s thesis. The power distribution among riparian states influences the allocation of scarce water resources. Upstream riparians usually have the upper hand vis-à-vis downstream riparians; they are able to export negative externalities to lower riparians while suffering few consequences for their action. In some cases, downstream riparians can be more powerful than upstream riparians if they have control over a disproportionate share of the river. For example, Egypt and Sudan, despite being lower and middle riparians, respectively, have 90 percent of the water of the Nile River, while the upper riparians have to make do with only 10 percent of Nile water. The power distribution among states, independent of their geographical position on the river they share, also impacts the management and allocation of

resources. States with a larger economy, military, and population are more likely to dominate river systems. This is particularly true in the case of China, which is not only the “upstream superpower of Asia” (Nickum, 2008) as most rivers in Asia have their water source in the Tibetan plateau, but also the dominant actor in Asia.

With few exceptions, such as the Indus River Commission, collective action or joint management of shared river basins around the world has been difficult. Studies by John Waterbury on the Nile River Basin illustrate the problem of collective action among ten riparian states (Waterbury, 1979; 2002). In areas where the relations among riparians are historically conflictive and where water resources are scarce, for example in the Jordan River area, management of water resources is even more contentious. Collective action is also difficult when large numbers of domestic actors with differing interests are involved in decision-making. Local governments, businesses, non-governmental groups, civil society, and private individuals can influence the management of rivers in multiple ways.

To study in greater depth how water politics can impact a region’s stability, we propose to convene an international workshop in May 2015 consisting of five panels. The research question that the workshop aims to address is:

***How does water politics impact stability in different regions of the world, and how can cooperation among riparians be enhanced to reduce conflict?***

Some related questions include:

1. How does the power distribution among riparian states affect the allocation of water resources?
2. How do non-state actors affect the management of international rivers?
3. What are the prospects for international or regional cooperation in managing shared water resources?
4. Why is collective action or joint management of shared water resources difficult? What are the hindrances?
5. What are both the short-term and long-term economic, environmental, and security impact of water politics on regional stability?

The workshop will assemble a team of leading scholars who are experts on the politics and management of international river basins in different parts of the world, including the Rhine, the Danube, the Nile, the Indus, the Brahmaputra, the Mekong, the Congo, the Amazon, the Colorado,

the Jordan, among others. The team of experts will be assembled in two stages: first, an invitation to prominent scholars will be issued, followed by a public call for papers to garner the best papers (after we have an idea of how many invited scholars have accepted our invitation). Selected papers will be compiled into an edited volume, with an introductory chapter that would compare water politics across regions, and a concluding chapter that would draw out the implications of water politics on regional stability. This important but under-studied subject should be of interest to leading university presses, such as Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Cornell University Press, Yale University Press, etc.

The ultimate goal of this workshop is to pilot a larger-scale, long-term project for studying the impact of resource competition and environmental issues on regional politics, thus establishing the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy as the leading authority on this topic. We plan to organize annual conferences along these lines so as to further institutionalize an approach to understanding the impact of resource and environmental issues on international relations.