

# **WATER AND SECURITY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: A CO-OPERATIVE DEBATE**

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The main argument of the paper is that water resource management is better conceived, understood and analysed through the theoretical framework of environmental security rather than through the conventional theoretical paradigms of international relations.

Until the late 1960s and the development of the Environmental Movement, International Relations was suffering from a profound ecological blindness. For as long as nature/environment appeared to be endlessly abundant and perpetually resilient, the study and practice of international relations could proceed with its business as usual. This is no longer the case. With the realisation that there are, indeed, limits to growth and the finiteness and depletion of the world's natural resources being more than just an extremist's fiction story, a new approach is called for. The conventional theoretical paradigms of international relations, occupied with their inter-rivalries on power, war and peace, seem unable to grasp the changing discourse. The three main schools of thought -namely realism, idealism and structuralism- are different ways of looking at the world and the facts/ events within it (Viotti & Kauppi, 1993). The actors are specific, the structure predetermined and the topic agenda narrow. They are complete world-views in themselves, with stark division lines that do not allow the blending together of different approaches. On the contrary, environmental issues do not recognise conceptual boundaries, nor do they respect state or institutional borders. The complexity of the environmental (and thus, water) crisis demands more innovative and receptive perceptions, interdisciplinary approaches and a combination of different theories in order to tackle it. There is a growing awareness that ecological health must be an essential ingredient in any recipe for international order.

As a result of these developments, the notion of security (both individual and collective) was put into a new spectrum and acquired a broader definition (Ullman, 1983; Tuchman, 1989; Litfin, 1999), where its military and political components are coupled with economic, social and environmental elements. Each part defines a focal point within the security problematique and a way of ordering priorities, but at the same time all are woven together into a strong web of linkages (B.Buzan; 1991, 1994, 1998). Much of security's intellectual history revolves around the debate between realists and idealists, where the former consider it as a derivative of power while the latter regard it as consequence of peace. A fully developed concept of security can actually lie between the extremes of power and peace and may provide the bridge covering the political and intellectual gap that usually separates them. This quality of security led Barry Buzan to argue that:

*“...the concept of security is, in itself, a more versatile, penetrating and useful way to approach the study of international relations than either power or peace” (Buzan, 1991: 3)*

Concurrently, the discussion over water resources –though always on the agenda- came into the forefront. It acquired its own trajectory and started claiming a leading role in the quest for environmental awareness. Though initially conceived as any other environmental issue at stake, in the last two decades water has gained an importance that transformed it into a topic that promotes and revitalises the environmental debate. Especially because of its nature as a multi-purpose good without any known substitutes (at least for domestic use). This is intimately linked also with the development discourse and the crisis of modernity, where intense industrialisation and economic growth usually sacrifice natural resources at the temple of modernisation (Turner, 1990; Wallestein, 1995). Water resources and water-related issues constitute an integral part of the concept of security and represent security issues per se. Discourses on water formulate a sensitive arena for debate, especially in the areas of the world where its scarcity is the primary focus (e.g. the Middle East and North Africa) and are also linked with a number of other development issues (e.g. population growth, poverty, gender, hunger and famine); thus, securitisation (and hence politicisation) of water has been a rather common practice.

In this paper it is argued that the sub-discipline of environmental security constitutes a particularly fertile field for the analysis of water issues. Among the reasons behind this argument are the following:

- a) The intellectually attractive qualities of the word security and the attributed flexibility to security’s theoretical core. This provides a way of linking together many areas of theory and promotes not only multi-disciplinarity but also inter-disciplinarity, since it allows for the blending together of different theoretical approaches. For example, you cannot be simultaneously a realist and an idealist in the understanding of international relations since by definition they exclude each other. Security Studies constitute a new discipline due to their wider agenda and thus, they do not put constraints into the qualitative and quantitative use of theoretical approaches. Essentially, when tackling the question ‘*how*’ when dealing with water resource problems, the answer may come from any intellectual field and any discipline as long as it responds to the new need. Thus, ideas drawn from physics and human geography, for example, can be combined together<sup>1</sup>.
- b) The political qualities of the concept create priority action. The word security, in itself, is a powerful tool in claiming attention for priority when it comes to competition for government -or other- attention. Securitising (and thus, further politicising) an issue, like water resources, is not essentially a negative policy. Such a method attributes the necessary significance to the issue at stake, the problem becomes crystal clear for all the involved stakeholders and the related institutions are forced to respond instantly and take up some action. Politicising water brings it to the front of the debate. It is the case that under crisis situations a ‘window of opportunity’ is opened for new policies to be initiated and implemented with high chances to remain into force even after the end of the crisis<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, in such circumstances the

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<sup>1</sup> There is a challenging research in process regarding the applicability of Complexity Theory into Social Sciences. For more on the project, see <http://is.lse.ac.uk/complexity/>

<sup>2</sup> In India the drought of last November led the central government to commit itself into creating a national inter-basin water transfer network. (Times of India, November 2002)

skeleton of institutions becomes visible and enables the identification of faults and problems in the functioning of the institution, allowing for improvements to be introduced.

- c) It is a multi-level approach that facilitates the involvement of all the levels of social and political interactions. So, the stakeholders can be simultaneously coming from the international as well as from the national, regional and local level. In the question ‘*where*’ the interaction takes place, the answer is at all levels, both separately and jointly, if that is necessary. This minimises the distance between the various actors and transforms all the involved parties into participants<sup>3</sup>.
- d) Finally it is a multi-centred/actor approach that promotes the participation of all the different actors that may be involved in a case. So, in the question ‘*who*’ is involved, the answer may include international agencies, states, bureaucracies, non-governmental organisations, governmental institutions as well as small groups of people and individuals<sup>4</sup>. This comes as a contrast to theories of international relations for example, in which different theories include different actors without a possibility of further involvement. So if you follow the realists you carry out discussions only among state entities, while if you are an idealist you include all the levels but priority is given to the individual and if you are a structuralist then you consider the international system as setting the basis of interaction.

These features make the sub-discipline of Environmental Security a highly suitable arena for the environmental/ water discourse to take place. It has the striking quality of politicising an issue and bringing it into the front of the international debate, while at the same time keeping tensions low and ensuring that co-operation is the ultimate goal through the spreading of common values to tackle shared problems. For example when one refers to highly popularised and overwhelmingly examined cases like the waters of the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates or the Jordan river, one usually points out primarily the tension among the riparian states and the different phases the dispute has been through, without acknowledging or publicising enough examples of co-operation and collaboration like in the case of Turkey and Syria<sup>5</sup>. In such cases even though water issues are highly politicised and securitised, at the same time, they constitute an element of co-operation based on their indisputable value to humans and human welfare; and this is precisely the merit of environmental security.

The utility of theoretical constructions has been often questioned and put under close scrutiny with regards to tangible results. However, a significant amount of scholarly work is still directed towards theoretical explorations, combinations and discoveries. Theories and theoretical approaches have the gift of detecting patterns and consistencies in actors’ behaviours.

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<sup>3</sup> An example in support of this argument is the construction of the controversial Ilisu Dam on the river Tigris in Turkey. The intervention of international green NGOs, like Green-Peace and Friends-of-the-Earth, in co-operation with third governments (UK, Italy etc.) and local governmental and non-governmental institutions resulted in the project having been postponed indefinitely with the most plausible future plan its cancellation. For a follow-up cover of the topic please look through the archive of The Guardian <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

<sup>4</sup> In Shanghai for example, water pollution concerns put forward by international environmental organisations in the late 1990s, raised the environmental awareness and strengthened the voice of the local civil society. As a result, the key stakeholders in water management in Shanghai now include the government as well as the private sector and a growing civil society.

<sup>5</sup> An illustrating example of this sort, is the Joint Communique signed in August 2001 by the Administration of the Southeast Anatolia Project of Turkey (GAP-RDA) and the General Organisation for Land Development of the Syrian Ministry of Irrigation (GOLD), with the purpose of organising common training programmes, draft and carry out joint projects and realise exchange programmes and partnerships.

Consistencies and patterns are able to show that under similar circumstances stakeholders may act in similar ways; thus, potentially enabling predictions and solutions to be found for specific problems. Moreover, theories with their open-ended contextual and evocative borders can explain and occlude, include and exclude points; it is this process of inclusion and exclusion that is perceived as the positive aspect of theorising, because it simplifies complex realities and makes their comprehension an intellectually manageable exercise. Thus, water resource management may become a simpler task by drawing from theoretical constructions, and, that of environmental security in particular. In Ayoob's words:

"...theories are like lenses that one puts on to view, understand, structure or construct reality"  
(Ayoob, 1998: 31)

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