

## From the Cold War to Water Wars: Some reflections of the changing global security agenda- A view from the South

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Looking back at the latter half of the twentieth century one can clearly discern that the politics of ideology largely determined the extent, magnitude and nature of conflicts. In this way, Cold War security specialists developed a plethora of terms: mutually assured destruction (MAD), flexible response, credible deterrence and the like to come to terms with their conflict-ridden world. Despite the fact that such terminology was used in an all-encompassing manner and that the titanic struggle between the USA and the USSR were waged on almost every continent, the truth is that from the perspective of the ordinary people in the South this ideological struggle was rather abstract in relation to their daily struggle for survival. Put simply, the possibility of famine or communal violence for the peasant farmer in Kathmandu or Kampala was far more real than the threat of a global thermonuclear war. Thus the strategic discourse of the twentieth century, though coached in global terms, really reflected the strategic concerns and imperatives of the dominant states in the global order.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the security discourse rapidly changed and was broadened. People, as opposed to states were regarded as the primary referents of security and this necessitated broadening the security agenda to include non-military security threats such as narco-trafficking, AIDS, and environmental degradation. This new security discourse has been labelled **human security** and has been defined by the Bonn Declaration as “... *an absence of threat to human life, lifestyle or culture*”. This new, more inclusive definition of security was a better ‘conceptual fit’ to the stark realities faced by developing countries and their populations.

The changes in the theoretical discourse, of course, reflected the tectonic shifts in the post-Cold War global security landscape. Freed from the straitjacket of global bipolarity, international politics is following a more turbulent trajectory. Nowhere is the saliency of this observation more clearly reflected than in the area of resource-based conflict. One such potential conflict area is scarce fresh water resources. That this is so is hardly surprising. Within the context of the developing world, water availability determines the sustainability of economic development. According to Anthony Turton<sup>2</sup> even in countries where the industrial sector is weak, water consumption in the agricultural sector can be as much as 80 percent. Thus within the context of the South, water security does

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Turton (1999). *Water and Conflict in an African Context*, **Conflict Trends**, No. 5, December 1999.

not simply translate into economic development but also food security and the very survival of states and their citizens. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the World Commission on the Environment and Development (WCED) has concluded that such resource conflicts “... *are likely to increase as the resources become scarcer and competition over them increases*”<sup>3</sup>. It has been estimated that over 1,7 billion people spread over eighty countries are suffering water shortages. Available evidence also suggest that such water shortages, and conflicts over water, will intensify over the coming years.

Various reasons account for this. Firstly, greater levels of pollution of our existing fresh water resources as a result of the intensification of industrialisation in the South where environmental standards tend to be weak or not implemented. Second, as a result of population growth with its concomitant increase in demand for more water. Consider the following in this regard: The world’s population stood at 5,3 billion in 1990, is expected to pass the 6,2 billion mark this year and reach 8,5 billion by the year 2025. The twist in the tale lies in the fact that those population growth levels are fundamentally uneven. Little of the projected population growth will take place in the North. The developed industrialised states’ share of the world’s population is decreasing dramatically. In 1950 it was 22 percent, 15 percent in 1985, and is projected to be a minuscule 5 percent by the year 2085. Conversely, much of the projected population growth will take place in the countries of the South. For instance, Ethiopia’s population is expected to increase from 47 million in 1990 to 112 million by 2025; Nigeria’s from 113 million to 301 million; Bangladesh’s from 116 million to 235 million; and India’s from 853 million to 1,446 million<sup>4</sup>. The ramification of this is the further escalation of conflict potential over scarce water resources in the developing world.

A third and relatively recent factor contributing to water scarcity is the impact of the El Nino/ Southern Oscillation weather phenomenon that causes dry conditions, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>5</sup>. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a report of the African Development Bank concluded as follows: “*Current calculations are that by 2000, South Africa will suffer water stress, Malawi will have moved into absolute water scarcity and Kenya will be facing the prospect of living beyond the present water barrier. By 2025, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zimbabwe will suffer water stress, Lesotho and South Africa will have moved into absolute water scarcity, and Malawi will have joined Kenya living beyond the present water barrier ... Competition for scarce water resources will intensify*”.

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<sup>3</sup> Heidi Hudson (1996). *Resourced-Based Conflict: Water(in)Security and its Strategic Implications*, in Hussein Solomon (ed.) **Sink or Swim? Water and Security in Southern Africa**. Monograph 6, Institute for Defence Policy.

<sup>4</sup> Hussein Solomon (1996). *Towards the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A new global security agenda?*, **ISS Occasional Papers No. 6**. Institute for Security Studies.

<sup>5</sup> Jo-Ansie van Wyk (1998). *River Dry, Mountain High: Water Security in Southern Africa*, **Conflict Trends**, No. 1, October 1998.

This competition for scarce water resources takes on ominous proportions if one considers that of the 200 first-order river systems, 150 are shared by 2 nations; and 50 by 10 nations all in all supporting approximately 40 percent of the world's population, two-thirds of whom are located in developing countries. Indeed, conflicts over scarce fresh waters have already occurred. Consider here those conflicts between:

- Turkey, Syria and Iraq around the waters of the Euphrates river;
- The dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the waters of the Nile;
- The tensions concerning the sharing of the waters of the Colorado river between the United States and Mexico; and
- The dispute between Botswana and Namibia over the waters of the Okavango Delta.

The above, of course, should not lead one to the erroneous conclusion that water scarcity equals armed conflict as if nothing can be done about the situation. Various measures can be implemented at various levels to ameliorate tensions arising from water scarcity. Firstly, at the international level, there is a tremendous need for the strengthening of international law and legal norms regarding water usage. Recently, Van Wyk<sup>6</sup> has noted that “...*international law as an instrument of regulation on transboundary freshwater issues is at present inconclusive and weak*”. Explaining why this is so Turton<sup>7</sup> notes, “*Existing international law refers to such concepts as equitable use, without defining what it means. There are also conflicting principles such as prior appropriation (which gives the state a right to water if it has mobilised that water previously and thus dependent on it for its survival) and riparian rights (which gives the riparian state the right to use water that flows through its sovereign territory)*”.

Secondly, given the weakness of the international regime, there is an urgent need for the strengthening of regional and sub-regional agreements to resolve problems regarding water scarcity and usage within specific geographic areas. Within the context of Southern Africa, a significant development in this regard was the signing of the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) *Protocol on Shared Watercourse Systems* on 28 August 1995. The purpose of this Protocol was to foster close co-operation for the judicious and co-ordinated utilisation of the shared watercourse systems within the SADC<sup>8</sup>.

Finally at national and local levels, much can be done by way of empowering civil servants and local communities by transferring skills in environmental dispute resolution to them by means of workshops and other training sessions.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12

<sup>7</sup> Turton, *op.cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Van Wyk, *op.cit.*, p. 13.