**The Politics of Water in the World**

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Water politics, or hydropolitics, is the politics affected by water and water resources. Due to several factors, the least of which being overpopulation, mass consumption, misuse, and pollution, the quality and availability of drinking water in the world is at an all-time low. Thanks to these many factors, the availability of viable drinking water is a strategic resource in the world, and is an important element in many political conflicts around the world. In some circles, water is being called the “next oil”, with water-rich countries like Canada, Chile, Norway, Colombia and Peru being poised in key positions when the problems come to a head.

UNESCO’s (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Water Development report, as of 2003, indicates that in the next 20 years, the quantity of drinkable water available to people is going to shrink by 30%. Already, 40% of the world’s people don’t have access to palatable drinking water as it is. In 2000 alone, over 2.2 million people alone died from contaminated water sources or dehydration. In 2004, WaterAid, a UK charity, reported that a child dies every 15 seconds from water-related diseases, which could have been easily prevented by, for example, proper waste disposal or the like. With the availability of clean water becoming more and more of an issue, and with the increased demand for clean water for agriculture, high-tech uses, and energy production, water is increasingly receiving attention as a resource requiring better management and sustainable use.

With nearly 2000 cubic meters of water per person per year, the United States leads the world in water consumption in the world, followed by 1600 cubic meters of water consumed by the average Canadian. This is twice the amount of the average person in France, and three times the amount the average German uses. Much of these numbers are much higher than the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) predicted. Of the various OECD nations, nine have actually reduced their water usage. However, most of the nations involved have increased their usage significantly since 1980 (Sweden, the Netherlands, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Poland, Finland and Denmark).

The Middle East has a particular problem when it comes to fresh water. It only has 1% of the world’s available fresh water, which is used by 5% of the world’s population. Fresh water is becoming more and more of a major concern in the Middle East. It’s predicted by the year 2025 the peoples along the Arabian Peninsula will be using more than double the amount of water normally available to them. Water politics have already played a key role in tensions in the region since the 1990s, already being held responsible in rising tensions between various countries such as Iraq, Syria and Turkey in 1990. Turkey had dammed sections of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, taking control of the water from neighboring Syria and Iraq. Iraq and Syria actually set aside their differences at the time to unite against Turkey in response to the control of the water resources in the area. In the Middle East, all major rivers cross at least one international border, with major rivers like the Tigris and the Euphrates crossing through at least three major countries. Because of this, the actions of one country and their treatment of the rivers can vastly affect other countries downstream. Thus, when then Atatürk Dam was constructed by Turkey in 1990, along with another projected 22 dams scheduled to be built afterwards, the rest of the region watched with apprehension. With the list of water-scarce countries in the region increasing more and more each year, the issue of water distribution in the Middle East is an issue that will not be easily dismissed.

Privatization of water resources has been seen by some as a possible solution to the water crisis, although attempts at this in the past have usually met with disaster due to poor water quality, increased prices, and various ethical concerns. In Bolivia for example, the privatization of water companies by IMF in 2000 was met by widespread protests which ended in the ousting of Bechtel, a US engineering firm based in San Francisco. Similar protests to the privatization of water resources in Buenos Aires ended up with driving off the French multinational company Suez, when their privatization of the water resources there ended up with the prices of water surging by over 500%. From similar incidents around the world, the surging price of water after privatization has generally lead to a distrust of privatization as a solution to the water crisis in general.

However, the future of politics concerning water isn’t all doom and gloom, necessarily. For example, the Indus Basin Project is a water control project brought about by the Indus Basin Treaty signed between India and Pakistan in 1960. The project consists of the construction of two dams, the Mangla Dam built on the Jhelum River and the Tarbela Dam constructed on the Indus River, together with their subsidiary dams. The treaty insures that Pakistan will receive water from the Indus River independent of upstream control by India.

In conclusion, with water becoming a more scarce resource as time goes on, we’re going to see more and more tense moments and conflicts over the control of water. If the fight for control of oil resources has taught us anything as a people, it’s that when a resource is wanted and needed the world over, people will go to great lengths to procure it. And unlike the fight for oil, a resource that can be easily enough replaced or done without, water is a vital necessity to the survival of the human race. In the next 20 years or more, we will most likely find several nations in one type of conflict or another in an attempt to secure water resources around the world. As seen above, in some areas of the world, these conflicts and tense moments have already begun. So what are we, as a world, to do about the problem?

For one thing, countries have begun working on lessening their needs for water through conservation. As we saw earlier, while the need for water per person in some countries has gone up significantly in the past 20 years, for others, it has remained more or less constant, or even gone down. Lessening pollution and better reclamation of waste waters can also help stave off the future crisis. Finally, as new and emerging technologies come onto the scene, hopefully there will be ways to procure new sources of fresh water in the future, through the desalinization and usage of sea water, for example. With a little planning and cooperation between various nations, we might be able to stave off disaster and survive as a people. However, this will more than likely be one of those issues that creep up on us and doesn’t become a major concern until it’s far too late, unless we act now.

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