

Rethinking transboundary waters: A critical hydrogeopolitics of the Mekong basin

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Abstract

Efforts to understand the geographical and political complexities of transboundary river basins—both within national jurisdictions and at international levels—must embrace critical interdisciplinary perspectives. In this paper, we focus attention on underdeveloped aspects of transboundary water conflicts and cooperation—e.g., how ecological understandings of river basins are transformed within transboundary institutional arrangements; the way multiple actors in transboundary basins construct geographical scales; and how control over water is represented and exercised within governance and management institutions. We advance the notion of critical hydrogeopolitics as a way of explicating these processes. We draw on a case study of conflict over and within the transboundary waters of the Mekong River basin to illustrate this approach. Our aim is to complement and extend ongoing research and policy debates concerning transboundary waters.

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Introduction

Many of the world's transboundary river basins are simultaneously perceived as important engines of regional economic development, as crucial bases of livelihood resources, and as critical sites of biodiversity conservation. These often competing roles make governance particularly challenging. When basins encompass multiple sovereign states, a paramount concern is how to design and sustain institutions to equitably share water resources. An extraordinary number of multilateral agreements designed to promote cooperation over international rivers have been drafted and signed over the course of the 20th century (Beach et al., 2000), yet the specter of 'water wars' continues to dominate popular conceptions of how interactions among states that share a river basin, particularly those in the Middle East (see Toset, Gleditsch, & Hegre, 2000) and other water-scarce regions, will proceed in the future (Ward, 2002).

The 'water war' thesis draws support from the water resource development literature, where postulations of an 'inevitable' global water crisis that will lead to more overt geopolitical conflicts have been advanced for nearly two decades (Falkenmark & Lundqvist, 1995; Gleick, 1993; Postel, 2000; Seckler, Barker, & Amarasinghe, 1999). Such predictions are also emblematic of the international rivers literature, which tends to focus almost entirely on the details of water rights and sharing among states (Kliot, Shmueli, & Shamir, 2001; Yetim, 2002), the technical and engineering challenges of water management (Ganoulis, Duckstein, Literathy, & Bogardi, 1996), and the legal dimensions of water use (Albert, 2000; Tarlock, 2001). These and similar works understand conflicts over water as limited almost exclusively to inter-state conflicts, and thus have very little to say about the multi-scalar, multi-actor character of water politics. Within political geography and cognate fields, studies of the efficacy of international accords in promoting river basin cooperation (Wolf, 1999), geopolitical developments in specific basins (Brichieri-Colombi & Bradnock, 2003; Freeman, 2001), the adaptability of multilateral river basin institutions (Shmueli, 1999), and the relationship between domestic and transnational forces driving water conflicts (Feitelson, 2002; Giordano, Giordano, & Wolf, 2002) have made important contributions to the growing empirical foundations for analyzing transboundary rivers. Yet they are also symptomatic of several missed opportunities. For example, some scholars of transboundary waters direct attention towards the 'international community' as the primary actor in forwarding a progressive global water agenda (Giordano & Wolf, 2003). However, evocation of the 'international community'—composed primarily of a network of elite actors (e.g., the global water industry, water research 'think tanks', representatives of the UN system, government representatives, policy experts, and scientific advisors)—pushing a global water agenda reveals little about the socioecological processes that delineate conflicts and transformations in specific basins.

Ultimately, the themes outlined above—the international scale of negotiations, transnational institutional arrangements, the relevance of international legal principles, and normative goals of efficient and equitable water-sharing—privilege the principal of 'cooperation' as analytical category and normative objective. This obscures the ways in which states, non-state actors and river basins themselves interact to construct 'transnational' basins through institutional and material processes. Cooperation in and of itself is not the desired end for third-world riparian governments who create transboundary governance institutions; rather, cooperation is perceived as the basis for proceeding with the *development* of water resources encompassed by basins. This has typically implied significant interventions in the form of hydroelectric dams, large-scale irrigation works, and other infrastructure projects. By focusing on the ways in which cooperation, among sovereign states, over shared rivers can be negotiated and implemented, past research

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