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Anthropocentric Hydro Politics? Key Developments in the Analysis of International Transboundary Water Politics and some Suggestions for Moving Forward

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review the key analytical developments in international trans-boundary water politics and to shed light on the important, but overlooked, issue of ecosystems. The scholarship has gained greater breadth than the narrowly focused 'water war' discussion of two decades ago. The understanding of power and power relations has given greater nuance to why and how conflict and cooperation occur in international trans-boundary river basins. A new conceptual approach, the Transboundary Waters Interaction Nexus (TWINS), is discussed briefly to show how the analysis of coexisting conflict and cooperation provides an insight into the cross-sector linkages of water and the resulting interests and motives governing water use and allocation. However, it is argued that much of the literature is anthropocentric and frames the natural environment through a human lens. This paper calls for more attention to the ways in which the analytical framework on trans-boundary water interaction can include ecosystems as legitimate users. The paper concludes with some suggestions for future research and policy discussions.

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1. Introduction

International transboundary river basins continue to garner scientific and policy attention in an era of increased climate change and uncertainty. The well-known figures of 145 countries with shared waters and approximately 40 per cent of the global population using these waters signify the spatial extent that the impacts of trans-boundary water management can have (UN Water, 2008). Moreover, faced with climate change, many of these basin states will experience heightened poverty, related to disasters such as droughts and flooding (Shepherd *et al.*, 2013). As the number of shared freshwater bodies has grown (currently to 263), various global water initiatives have highlighted the risks of conflict and opportunities for cooperation. For example, the World Water Council has convened events to deliberate the issues of trans-boundary water management through multiple World Water Forums. The Global Environmental Facility counts 'International Waters' as one of their key areas of focus. Since the late 1980s (when environmental security was mainstreamed in academic debates) scholarship has demonstrated a wider range of issues beyond 'water wars'. Issues of access and allocation bind these debates over conflict and cooperation (Gupta and Lebel, 2010). International trans-boundary river basins offer opportunities for science-policy dialogue over the management and governance of shared waters. Emerging ideas on water security and the water-energy-food nexus are good examples of debates that seek to link scientific knowledge and policy-making. However, solving problems within

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these shared river basins is not easy; policies for the institutional development of shared waters face many bottlenecks. Academic debate to inform solutions can be constrained and default to a superficial analysis of water conflicts or risk apolitical analysis.

The purpose of this paper is to take stock of the recent advances made in the scholarship on conflict and cooperation over international trans-boundary river basins and to suggest ways for moving forward to sharpen analysis and its policy relevance. In particular, the paper examines the ways in which the politics of access to and allocation of water resources and associated externalities have been analyzed. Within the limits of this paper, first we briefly trace how hydropolitical studies, influenced by international relations, geopolitics and other broadly social science disciplines, have expanded the breath of analysis. This review is not intended to be comprehensive, but indicative. Another caveat is that this paper examines trans-boundary surface waters, though issues of shared aquifers are becoming increasingly important. It is then shown how analysis of trans-boundary water politics may be trapped in an anthropocentric perspective. While there may be better understanding of power relations between states, it is argued that existing analysis is actor-centric, thus framing the natural environment as being subject to human intervention. The paper concludes with some suggestions for future research and policy discussions.

2. Analysing conflict and cooperation over shared waters

Studies on environmental security have played an important role in raising the profile of the problem of natural resource scarcity and the potential for conflict. The oft-cited work by Gleick in the early 1990s pointed out the potential links between water scarcity and conflict (e.g. Gleick, 1991, 1993). Since then, the overall body of literature on environmental studies has further developed to reconsider the object of security and various threats (see Mirumachi, 2013). In addition, quantitative and qualitative studies, including those referring to neoliberal international relations theory, have examined the role of agreements, treaties and institutions, providing alternative perspectives to the relationship between water scarcity and cooperation (e.g. Mitchell and Hensel, 2007; Conca, 2006; Lowi, 1993). However, the notion of ‘water wars’ in international trans-boundary river basins has appealed to the mass media and it provides an attention-grabbing entry point to policy discussions. For example, controversy over the Ethiopian plans to develop the Grand Renaissance Dam in the Nile River Basin was dubbed as ‘water wars’ between the upstream state and downstream Egypt (Schwartzstein, 2013). Analysts, such as Chellaney (2013), used ‘water wars’ to capture the nature of interstate rivalry and diplomatic tensions. The term now serves as a synonym, not only for acute military conflict, but also for non-violent disputes.

The persistence of the notion of ‘water wars’ and the generalised use of this term, are unhelpful in qualifying the features and causal relations between water resources and interstate interaction. It is argued that the interaction between states should be the focus of analysis, rather than snap shots of conflictive or cooperative events (Zeitoun and Mirumachi, 2008). The seminal work by Wolf and his colleagues on the development of the Transboundary Freshwater Dispute Database showed, through quantitative analysis, that much of the interaction between states does not occur at the extremes of warfare or peaceful unity (Wolf *et al.*, 2003; Yoffe *et al.*, 2003). Zeitoun and Mirumachi (2008) provided a review of the mostly qualitative analysis that has attempted to theorise conflict and cooperation over water between states. They argued that while analysis of water conflict investigates social barriers to the access to and allocation of water and not merely physical scarcity, water cooperation is largely under-theorised. Importantly, they pointed out that much of the international trans-boundary water literature conceptualises conflict and cooperation in a linear fashion, with normative assumptions about moving away from conflict to achieve cooperation. Crucially, understanding conflict and cooperation as independent benchmarks to characterise a river basin risks overlooking the complex political context in which the management and governance of water resources are deliberated. The static nature of labelling a particular basin as ‘conflictive’ or ‘cooperative’ masks the changing landscape of actors involved, and consequently, the power dynamics between these actors. Thus, it is productive to focus the analysis on trans-boundary water interactions between basin states, rather than taking particular events related to water as a measure of the success (or failure) of basin management and governance.

Transboundary water interaction is shaped by and shapes power relations between basin states. As Zeitoun *et al.* (2011) noted, power is not only about wielding military or economic strength to advance one’s interests, but also about the subtle influences of convincing and persuading, resulting in consent without resorting to violence. These forms of both hard and soft power are constantly used in transboundary water interactions. In particular, soft power is effective in embedding asymmetrical water allocation in negotiated agreements that reduce the chances for challenging the status quo by those basin states with less power. Using the case of Nepal and India, Mirumachi (2013) showed how a

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