



The Circle of Hydro-Hegemony between riparian states, development policies and borderlands: Evidence from the Talas waterscape (Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan)



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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, transboundary water management has come to play a key role both in global environmental politics debates and in the shaping of international development policies, specifically in the Global South. As a consequence, a growing body of literature in the framework of critical hydropolitics has emerged reflecting on the role that power, discourses, and strategies play in shaping transboundary water policies and in influencing riparian relations. The focus on a state-centric perspective, however, often has led to neglect of the role of international development actors in shaping these policies. Through a critical application of the Circle of Hydro-Hegemony (CHH) and ethnographic qualitative field research in borderlands, this contribution aims to analyse how the establishment of a development initiative known as the Chu-Talas Commission, supported by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and other donors, has influenced and shaped transboundary water politics in the Talas waterscape, which is shared by Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The evidence shows that despite the international narration of the Chu-Talas Commission as a success story for water cooperation in Central Asia, Kazakhstan, through the deployment of both material and bargaining power strategies, has been able to shape UNECE development policies in its favour, impose its agenda on Kyrgyzstan, and emerge as the basin hydro-hegemon.

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, transboundary water management has gained a key role in international relations between riparian states. Several rivers – particularly in the Middle East and in Central and Southeast Asia – have assumed a transboundary nature due to the political and border reconfigurations linked to the dismantlement of the colonial order and the end of the Cold War. Transboundary water management has a complex political nature since it is subject to processes of negotiation, control, utilization, and allocation (Zeitoun and Mirumachi, 2008; Zeitoun et al., 2013).

A growing body of literature recognises the importance of a critical approach to hydropolitics (among others, Sneddon and Fox, 2006; Warner and Zeitoun, 2008; Julien, 2012; Menga, 2016b) as a way to further our understanding of the role that power and discourses play in influencing international water relations and in shaping transboundary water policies. By taking power asymmetries into account, scholars

have revealed the inequalities that often mark transboundary water relations, in spite of outward claims of cooperation (Zeitoun and Mirumachi, 2008; Zeitoun et al., 2011).

This seems to be the case with the Talas transboundary waterscape¹, a river basin shared by Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan that is generally singled out as a success story in transboundary cooperation (UNECE, 2011a; Libert, 2014) in the otherwise conflictual regional political setting in Central Asia (Wegerich, 2008a,b). In particular, the establishment of the Chu-Talas Commission – a bilateral body created in 2006 to facilitate water resources allocation in the Chu and Talas waterscapes shared by Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – has been hailed as the way forward in water cooperation in Central Asia (UNECE, 2011a; Libert and Lipponen, 2012). The aim of this paper is to critically examine water politics in the Talas waterscape and argue that, in spite of their significant efforts, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and other donors such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations Commission

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¹ The concept of waterscape has increasingly emerged over the last decade in research that discusses the interactions between water, power and socio-political dynamics (Swyngedouw, 1997; Loftus, 2009; Budds and Hinojosa, 2012).

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) were unsuccessful in their objective of imposing an international development discourse based on the principle of benefit-sharing, as well as in their attempt to balance state power between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The reasons for this, it will be argued, are to be found in the political strategies implemented by Kazakh water authorities at different scales, which effectively used their power to hamper the activities of UNECE, OSCE, UNESCAP and ADB and get Kazakhstan a more powerful position and a more favourable water allocation than the one to which the country is entitled based on existing bilateral agreements.

Transboundary water politics in the Talas transboundary waterscape will be analysed using the hydro-hegemonic approach proposed by Menga (2016a), the Circle of Hydro-Hegemony (hereinafter CHH), an analytical framework devised to understand how basin riparians use different forms of power to maintain, or counter, hegemony. The CHH has been chosen, among other reasons, for its emphasis on water politics as evolving political processes, something that enables the adoption of a broader perspective in the analysis of transboundary water interactions, one that, as it will be argued, allows examining the layered nature of hegemonic struggles. This is relevant to the case of the Talas waterscape, where the nature of political negotiations has considerably evolved since the early 2000s, particularly because of the increasing role played by international development actors, and most prominently by UNECE. The Talas waterscape was firstly regulated through a Soviet inter-republican agreement signed in 1983, almost a decade after the development of its main hydraulic infrastructures. These included the Kirov reservoir, its canals network and the pumping systems, which were set in place to face the inter-republican water issues emerged at the end of the 1970s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the increasing tensions over water between independent Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, a new agreement was signed in 2000 (Wegerich, 2008a; Dukhovny and De Schutter, 2011). Since 2002 UNECE, OSCE, and UNESCAP have promoted the establishment of the Chu-Talas Commission as part of a wave of international development initiatives to reform and restructure water politics in the Global South and post-socialist states (Libert and Lipponen, 2012; Libert, 2014). The Commission, which was designed to support and strengthen Kyrgyz-Kazakh interstate water cooperation, was established in 2006, setting in place a new institutional structure formed by members of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz water authorities (Wegerich, 2008b; UNECE, 2011b). Through the application of the CHH to the Talas waterscape, this paper contributes to the literature exploring the role of power in transboundary water politics and the influence of international development initiatives in shaping these politics and riparian relations (see, among others, Zeitoun and Warner, 2006; Zeitoun, 2008; Cascao, 2008, 2009; Menga and Mirumachi, 2016; Zinzani, 2017).

This paper also responds to Furlong's (2008) incisive argument that most hydro-hegemony analyses suffer from a state-centric approach and do not really engage with issues of scale. As Sneddon and Fox (2012) observed, "a variety of agents associated with spatial scales and organisational levels ranging from the global to the local" may shape transboundary waterscapes. The hydro-hegemony scholarship has generally ignored these agents. Therefore, and with the aim of critically contributing to this scholarship, the present study will also draw on critical water geography to avoid the territorial trap and illustrate how scalar differences can bring constraints and limitations to the use of power. Despite considerable efforts aimed at promoting cooperation between riparian states in different transboundary waterscapes, such as for instance in the Nile (Nile Basin Initiative), in the Mekong (Mekong River Commission), and in the Indus (Indus Water Treaty), little research has focused on the analysis of international development policies and on borderlands hydropolitics (Sneddon and Fox, 2006; Mustafa, 2007; Cascao, 2009; Suhardiman et al., 2012). Thus, by taking on the concepts of waterscape and borderlands, the use of a multi-scalar approach within the CHH and a critical reflection on international

development initiatives, the present study aims to provide a novel and innovative contribution to critical hydropolitics, moving forward the hydro-hegemony literature. In addition to broadening this focus, this paper seeks to extend our understanding of the political processes around water sharing in Central Asia, a topic that has received scant attention in the research literature. Numerous studies have examined water politics in the region, but have focused predominantly on issues related to the desiccation of the Aral Sea (Spor, 1998; Vinogradov and Langford, 2001; Micklin, 2007), the inability of the Central Asian republics to find a solution to regional water problems (Klötzli, 1997; Micklin, 2002; Heltzer, 2003; Wegerich, 2008a,b), the role of water and climate change in triggering interstate conflicts (Smith, 1995; Krutov and Spor, 2003; Bernauer and Siegfried, 2012), the coexistence of conflict and cooperation (Elhance, 1997; Weinthal, 2006; Allouche, 2007), and the implementation politics of international development initiatives (Sehring, 2009; Bichsel, 2009; Zinzani, 2015a, 2015b).

With all the above in mind, this paper sets out to provide a novel analysis of water politics in Central Asia while providing a constructive critique to the hydro-hegemony scholarship. This is done by placing the spotlight on Kazakhstan, a country that discussions of regional water politics have generally overlooked in favour of attention to Uzbekistan (arguably the region's hydro-hegemon) and to Tajikistan's and Kyrgyzstan's ambitious hydropower development plans (Menga, 2014). The paper illustrates that the image of Kazakhstan as a mediating force in regional water politics, along with that of President Nursultan Nazarbayev as a benevolent regional leader who managed to bring its country to the chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010 (Isaacs, 2010), does not necessarily illuminate its bilateral water relations with Kyrgyzstan. The paper also reflects on the role of initiatives promoted by non-state actors, such as UNECE, UNESCAP, OSCE, and ADB, to assess the extent to which development actors can actually influence transboundary water politics in the Global South. The next section gives a brief overview of the CHH and of the relevance of the concepts of power and hegemony to understanding transboundary water politics and international development policies. The third section discusses international development initiatives in Central Asia and introduces the Talas waterscape and its institutional background, while the fourth section applies the CHH to the case-study and discusses the findings that emerged from this analysis. Finally, the fifth section concludes the paper, identifying suggestions for future research.

2. Critical hydropolitics, the CHH and water development policies

This study builds on the body of literature that emphasises the role of power, power asymmetries, and discourses to advance the notion of a 'critical hydropolitics' (Sneddon and Fox, 2006). Zeitoun and Warner's (2006) Framework of Hydro-Hegemony (FHH) was the first structured contribution to hydropolitics that focused on how power shapes transboundary water relations. The FHH draws on Lukes's (1974) dimensions of power and on the Gramscian notion of hegemony to provide an analytical framework based on three pillars – riparian position, power, and exploitation potential – which serve as an explanation for power asymmetries in a river basin. In a critical hydropolitical approach that examines the influence of power on transboundary water relations, discursive framings can play an important role in determining the outcome of interstate negotiations. Menga and Mirumachi (2016: 373), have for instance illustrated that the "analysis of the discursive and ideological dimensions of power, or 'soft' power, in particular, enables insights to strategies of water control under conditions of power asymmetries between basin states".

The FHH has been recently reconceptualised by Menga (2016a: 410), who argued that the "FHH offers extremely useful insights to the understanding of interstate relations, but does not explicitly show that hegemony and not power is its central element". According to Menga, the concept of hydro-hegemony – which he defined as "the success of a basin riparian in imposing a discourse, preserving its interests and

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