Water, Energy, Cooperation, and Conflict in the Kura-Araks Basin of the South Caucasus

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http://www.awra.org
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“So, how does it feel to be a pawn in the new Great Game, my friend?”

-Russian water resources engineer
Talk Purpose

- Illustrate the confluence of water, energy, cooperation, and conflict in the South Caucasus, a relatively small region of the world.

- Implications for the rest of us - why should we care about this strip of land between the Black and Caspian Seas?

- How water can be used to promote cooperation
Central Asia and the South Caucasus
The Great Game: ‘Old’ and ‘New and Improved’

• **Old**
  Strategic rivalry and competition between Russia and the British Empire for primacy in Central Asia during the 19th century.

• **New and Improved**
  Competition between the Russian-Chinese axis and the ‘Democratic West’ (USA, EU, et al.) for favor with/ influence over Central Asian and South Caucasus countries, especially with respect to natural resources.
Some Differences between ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Great Games

- Access to energy and other resources are at the center of the game

- Central Asia and South Caucasus are not passive; they have power via location, energy, and other resources

- More players; alliances (e.g., SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organization)

- Individual members of each competing group do not always have aligned interests
Kura-Araks Basin (KAB): Some Facts

- Kura Q downstream from Araks: mean: 443 m³/s, max: 2,250 m³/s, min: 206 m³/s
- Total basin area: 188,200 km²
- Basin area in SC countries: 122,200 km²
- Kura: 1,360 km, Araks: 1,070 km
- Both streams rise in Turkey, join in Azerbaijan, flow to Caspian Sea
- No formal agreements among riparians regarding water allocation, quality, ecosystem maintenance – potential conflict!
The Kura-Araks: So What?

• Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Kura-Araks is now a transboundary, transnational river basin with respect to the three South Caucasus republics.

• Water-related problems in the Kura-Araks Basin have since been exacerbated.

• It is in the region’s and (presumably) the world’s best interests to solve these problems.

Why?
Contributing Factors to South Caucasus Conflict

- Corruption
- Ethnic, religious tensions
- Internal strife (distribution of wealth, desire for autonomy, etc.)
- Deteriorating water quality
- Reduction in water supply (whether anthropogenic, climate-induced, etc.)
- Economic conditions
- Hegemony (Russian Federation, USA, EU)
The South Caucasus: A Nice Place to Visit, But…

“Handguns are acceptable; semi-automatic weapons must be checked at reception.”

-- sign on the door, Metechi Palace Hotel, Tbilisi, Georgia (removed when it became a Sheraton Hotel)
South Caucasus River Monitoring Project

NATO Science for Peace Programme
(1 November 2002 - 31 December 2008)

Partner Country Project Director (PPD)
Prof. Nodar Kekelidze, Georgia

Partner Country Co-Directors
Dr. Armen Saghatelyan, Armenia
Dr. Bahruz Suleymanov, Azerbaijan

NATO Project Director (NPD)
Prof. Michael E. Campana, USA

NATO Project Co-Directors
Dr. Freddy Adams and Dr. Eiliv Steinnes
1) Build SC capacity in water quality and quantity monitoring
2) Monitor surface water quality at 33 locations in the KAB (T, pH, major/minor ions, nutrients, metals, POPs, radionuclides)
3) Monitor stream discharge
4) Make all water quality data readily available (www.kura-araks-natosfp.org)
Project Long-Term Objective

To build trust and establish the social and technical bases for a transboundary, cooperative, and transparent water resources management agreement among the Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The agreement will cover water quantity and quality and stream ecosystem maintenance.

Why do this?
Minimize conflict over water!
Kura-Araks River Basin
To build trust and establish the social and technical bases for a transboundary, cooperative, and transparent water resources management agreement among the Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The agreement will cover water quantity and quality and stream ecosystem maintenance.

Bottom-up project!

(http://www.kura-araks-natosfp.org)
Technical cooperation will “diffuse upward” into the highest levels of government in the three republics, leading to peace and stability (and uninterrupted flows of gas and oil! - my cynical comment)
Interviews: Countries’ Viewpoints

• 35%: other two countries are not ready to cooperate over water.

• 16%: Armenia and Azerbaijan will not cooperate at the official level until Nagorno-Karabakh issue is resolved.

• 97%: Important to have reliable, accurate information about Kura-Araks in other countries.

• 93%: An IWRM agreement among countries could lead to peace and improved welfare in the region.
**Most Important Issues**  
(survey of 30 water professionals)

**Armenia**
Need for an “Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM)” [http://www.gwpforum.org] and/or a “Transboundary Water Resources Management” mechanism. Also emphasized public awareness and participation and rehabilitation of existing and construction of new waste-water treatment plants.

**Azerbaijan**
Most important issue was “water contamination problems” followed by “ecological issues” and the need for an “IWRM mechanism” in their country.

**Georgia**
Need for “legal and regulatory measures” and an “IWRM mechanism”. The second issue for the Georgians was funding sources for the water related projects.
Recommendations

- Establish committee to coordinate various projects
- Form basin commission to provide water resources coordination; involve Turkey and Iran
- Develop “shared vision” model
- Update country water codes, allowing for changes in light of new information/changing conditions. Manage water quantity, water quality, land use, and ecosystem health simultaneously
- Stakeholder involvement - watershed councils
- Continue to address “non-water” problems that could lead to conflict
Is This the Region’s Future?

“People are capable of doing horrible things to each other. What they seem reluctant to do is turn off each other’s water.”

-- Dr. Aaron T. Wolf, OSU
Or This?

“The optimist learns English. The pessimist learns Chinese. The realist learns Kalashnikov.”

-- Armenian colleague
Thank You!
(Kura River, Tbilisi, Georgia)