

Power and Water in Central Asia

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1 On water, politics, and Central Asia

Water flows. And so does time. But while time always flows at the same speed (at least from the point of view of a social scientist), water flows are not immutable. Natural and artificial phenomena such as precipitation, droughts, dams, and canals can alter water flows with sometimes dire consequences for those at the receiving end. And yet, with time comes change. People die and are born, wars are won and lost, empires collapse, countries separate and merge, and even climate changes. This book will develop along two main threads: that of time, in the guise of evolving political scenarios and processes in post-Soviet Central Asia, and that of water, as it flows in the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers.

The fact that water is one of the key themes of this book can be easily inferred from its title; the importance of time to this project merits more explanation. Time, and together with it, change, matter because if it was not for the abrupt collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, we would not be discussing water politics in Central Asia today. The demise of the Soviet Union was indeed one of the crucial events of the twentieth century. Never before in history had an event of this social and political magnitude emerged with almost no violence (Kramer, 2003). Besides its global impact, which marked the end of the Cold War and of the bipolar international system of superpowers¹ (Huntington, 1999), the vanishing of the last multinational empire gave birth to fifteen countries, as the fifteen constituent republics of the Soviet Union all of a sudden acquired the status of sovereign states.² Among them, the five Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which never existed before as distinct states, were the least prepared to manage an unexpected and not necessarily sought independence (Mandelbaum, 1994).

These five countries were literally thrust out of the Soviet Union when Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine decided to reform themselves as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in December 1991 (Olcott, 1996). One of the implications of this premature birth was that the old economic and political ties established by the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and with them the centralised Soviet resource distribution system that managed the exchange and allocation of water, energy, and food supplies among the

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republics. A whole new set of international relations emerged, and the newly formed Central Asian governments had to redefine the policies related to the exchange and sharing of their natural resources.

This book explores the interconnections and interdependence that emerged from this complex scenario, and the related power dynamics in interstate relations in Central Asia,³ a region that offers a unique viewpoint for the analysis of transboundary water politics (henceforth hydropolitics). While, on the one hand, there is a certain degree of continuity between the old communist rule and the nature of the newly formed Central Asian government, on the other hand, important changes have occurred and the five Central Asian republics have all followed their own distinct trajectory.⁴ Furthermore, their youth as republics allows us to review the entire process through which the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggle for the control of the region's water resources has manifested during the last twenty-five years. This is important because hydropolitics, it will be argued, needs to be observed as a process, rather than as a series of isolated events, if we are to fully understand it. As Linton (2010: 4) tellingly explained in his historicised account of water, water is fundamentally a process, and therefore, "[w]ater is what we make of it, but it seldom stays that way for long." And certainly, if we apply Linton's logic to transboundary water relations, it is evident that the agency of governments can make many things out of water. The signing of a treaty on water cooperation, the construction of a water reservoir, the dissemination of a specific discourse on water management, or the militarisation of the border between two countries are all examples of the ways in which a government can use power to obtain a desired end (such as, for instance, a more advantageous water allocation). Viewing these series of events as part of a broader process can reveal the constant struggle for hegemony that drives interstate relations in several contested river basins around the world, and consequently help us dig beneath the surface of hydropolitics.

The politics of international waters

But why should we focus on the politics of international waters? Why it is important to study how water shapes relations among states and broader regional dynamics? First of all, and rather obviously, water is a quintessential component for life and for the development of societies, and therefore inevitably influences political activities and negotiations. Water is also an irreplaceable and transient resource, which crosses political boundaries in the form of rivers, lakes, and groundwater aquifers. Freshwater resources account for only 2.5%⁵ of total world water, and this relative scarcity further increases their political and economic relevance. Overall, 276 river basins around the world cross the boundaries of two or more countries, and their basin areas comprise about 47% of the land surface of the earth, containing 40% of the world's population (Wolf, 2007). For two-thirds of these rivers – including the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya – there is no agreement

between the countries that share them, which is evidence of the problematic nature of cooperation over water (Holmgren et al., 2013). According to Peter Mollinga (2001: 733), “[a]t a general level, the statement that ‘water is politics’ hardly needs any defence,” and indeed, if we accept politics as the activity of bringing together and defending our friends, and disaggregating and fighting our enemies (Bobbio et al., 2004), we can perhaps also understand why hydropolitics has been primarily examined as “the systematic study of conflict and cooperation between States over water resources that transcend international borders” (Elhance, 1999: 3).

Elhance’s view effectively sums up the dichotomous approach towards the discipline maintained in the 1990s and early 2000s. Neo-Malthusian⁶ (among others, Falkenmark, 1992; Gleick, 1993; Homer-Dixon, 1994, 1999; Gleditsch, 1998; Toset et al., 2000; Klare, 2001; Russell and Morris, 2006) and Cornucopian⁷ (e.g. Deudney and Matthew, 1999; Elhance, 1999; Wolf and Hamner, 2000; Allan, 2001; Jägerskog, 2003; Phillips, 2006; Wolf et al., 2006; Dannreuther, 2007; Hamner, 2008; Dinar et al., 2011) scholars, respectively, saw water as a reason for either conflict or cooperation, thus mirroring the two main discourses forming the rationalist paradigm of International Relations (IR), realism, and liberalism. And at the outset, because water is a relatively scarce and irreplaceable resource, it is unsurprising that water management was linked to security concerns. The end of the Cold War set a milestone causing the falling-off of the traditional security threats and the development of a new global political agenda. Problems that transcend national borders, such as global warming, water scarcity, and pollution, emphasised the world’s growing environmental interdependence, redefining the concept of national sovereignty and stressing the need for regional rather than national solutions.⁸ Towards the end of the 1980s, with a groundbreaking article published in *Foreign Affairs*, Jessica Tuchman Mathews (1989) called for a redefinition of the concept of national security to include resource, environmental, and demographic issues.⁹ A few years later, in 1994, Robert Kaplan’s pessimist and highly debated article “The Coming Anarchy” (1994) defined the environment as the key national security issue of the early twenty-first century, the one that would set the tone for international relations in the years to come.

Water was quickly connected to security issues and to the imminent occurrence of wars over its control (Naff and Matson, 1984; Starr and Stoll, 1988). In a widely cited article, Joyce R. Starr (1991: 17) warned that

as early as the mid-1980s, U.S. government intelligence services estimated that there were at least 10 places in the world where war could break out over dwindling shared water...into the perilous zone where all available fresh surface and groundwater supplies will be fully utilized.

The water wars narrative gained momentum, and as Warner et al. observed (forthcoming), “[e]ver since Naff and Matson and Starr and Stoll

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proclaimed international water wars, violent open conflict over water has preoccupied politicians, journalists and academics.” Indeed, besides realist scholars and sensationalist media articles, leading politicians and former UN Secretary-Generals also warned about an imminent water war, thus providing a more official angle to such claims. Boutros Boutros-Ghali (BBC News, 2003) predicted that “the next war in the Middle East will be fought over water, not politics,” and Kofi Annan added that “fierce competition for fresh water may well become a source of conflict and wars in the future” (United Nations University, 2011). Ban Ki Moon underlined the potential of water to fuel wars and conflicts, explaining that “water scarcity threatens economic and social gains and is a potent fuel for wars and conflict” (United Nations University, 2011).¹⁰

Despite such predictions, water wars have (almost) never occurred in the past, and are unlikely to happen in the future. In 2000, a groundbreaking study carried out at Oregon State University by a team of scholars led by Aaron Wolf (Wolf et al. 2003 and later) demonstrated that during the last 4,500 years there have been 3,600 water-related treaties and only one known water war between nations. That single water war occurred in 2500 B.C. between the Sumerian states of Lagash and Umma in the Tigris-Euphrates basin (Wolf, 2007: 20). The reason for this predominance of cooperation, according to Wolf, is that water is too important to fight over. At the sub-national level, water can exacerbate existing tensions and even cause conflicts, but at the interstate level, things go differently (Wolf et al., 2006).

And yet, water wars are apparently still looming on the horizon, at least according to alarmist newspaper articles (Al Jazeera, 2016; BBC News, 2016; Foreign Affairs, 2016) and government reports (US Senate, 2011) that recurrently single out Central Asia as a hot spot for a future water war. While the actual occurrence of a water war is a remote prospect, it is undeniable that fundamental water problems persist, both in Central Asia and elsewhere. As emphasised by the 2015 WHO report on “Progress on sanitation and drinking water” (WHO, 2015), at the global level 2.5 billion people still lack improved sanitation, and 1.1 billion people (15% of the world population) still practice open defecation. Furthermore, it is estimated that by 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living in conditions of absolute water scarcity (meaning that their annual water supplies will be below 500 cubic metres per person per year) and almost half the world’s population will be living in areas of high water stress (i.e. with an annual water supply lower than 1,700 cubic metres per person) by 2030 (International Decade for Action “Water for Life” 2005–2015, no date). According to the 2015 UN World Water Development Report (UN Water, 2015: 7), “the global water crisis is one of governance, much more than of resource availability,” and less than 20% of the agreements over transboundary waters are multilateral. Countries tend to manage shared water resources bilaterally, a sign of the missing political will to engage in long-term agreements at the river basin level.

And indeed, if one for instance looks at the Water Conflict Chronology, a tool created by the Pacific Institute think tank to examine the connections between water resources, international security, and conflict (accessible at <http://worldwater.org/water-conflict/>), it is clear that shared freshwater resources have caused and are still causing numerous interstate conflicts around the world. While in the 1990s Miriam Lowi's (1993) distinction between the "low politics" of water and the "high politics" of war and diplomacy seemed generally acceptable, it seems now more appropriate to refer to a global "high politics of water" (Nicol et al., 2012). As Zeitoun et al. (2017) illustrated, deeply entrenched water conflicts are at present observable in several international river basins. Conflict hotspots include the Tigris-Euphrates River basin; shared by Turkey, Iraq, and Syria; the Jordan River basin, shared by Israel, Palestine, and Jordan; and the Nile River basin, shared, among others, by Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan. The roots of these conflicts are to be found, for example, in an unequal geographical water distribution, seemingly incompatible water demands (such as those of irrigation and hydropower), poor governance, weak institutional frameworks, and water mismanagement. But more than anything else, I will argue, conflict and cooperation over water resources depend on a highly nuanced variety of power dynamics and power asymmetries. While water is not political by default, it is the medium through which politics unfold (Mirumachi, 2015). The transient nature of water creates an inherent competition between different users, and this is what makes water a deeply political matter, since it becomes "implicated in contested relationships of power and authority" (Bakker, 2012: 616). At the governmental level, hydropolitical constructions of scale and discursive framings of river basin development can be central to a state's deployment of power and to its territorial consolidation (Harris and Alatout, 2010). After all, as Molle (2008: 132) observed, policy-making decisions "do not emerge by chance but, rather, are the emanation of complex webs of interests, ideologies, and power."

Therefore, and based on the recognition that in the context of transboundary river basins the geographical location to the shared water resources becomes less of a determining factor than the use of power (Mirumachi, 2015), a critical approach to hydropolitics emerged in contrast to mainstream rationalist studies of water politics. This is partially due to the dissatisfaction with the two mainstream theories of the discipline, neo-realism and neo-liberalism, which cannot provide a plausible justification to the diversity of water-related interstate relations around the globe (Julien, 2012), nor can it explain, for instance, why basins with similar levels of water scarcity or similar geographical configurations may have very different types of conflict and cooperation. As Le Billion pointed out, these two schools of thought provide a somewhat deterministic explanation of conflictive and cooperative relations over water, one that "fail[s] to take into account the socially constructed nature of resources" (Le Billion, 2001: 565). It took a constructivist

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study (Kalpakian, 2004) to demonstrate that the Indo-Pakistani wars were caused by issues related to identity and not to water scarcity, as previous mainstream hydropolitics had hypothesised (Julien, 2010).

To the same extent, several studies (Smith, 1995; IWMI, 1998; and Wegerich, 2003) have noted that water in Central Asia is indeed abundant and not scarce as is often stated (US Senate, 2011; The Diplomat, 2015). Water in Central Asia is certainly unevenly distributed and inefficiently used, as this book will illustrate, but overall the region cannot be considered water scarce. The Aral Sea basin has a total renewable water flow of 115.60 km³ per year (FAO, 1997), sufficient to sustain the needs of around 68 million people. There is a striking difference between the Aral Sea basin and the Nile river basin, for instance. The latter is generally considered water scarce and indeed relies on a total renewable water flow of 80 km³ per year to sustain more than 200 million people (Nile Basin Initiative, 2012). Beyond mainstream hydropolitical analysis and also beyond notions of water scarcity, diverging interests, ideologies, and discourses need to be looked at to understand regional water relations. Water is a multidimensional resource that, besides its strategic and economic dimensions, bears a strong social, environmental, and cultural significance (Rahaman and Varis, 2005).

A critical approach to hydropolitics acknowledges the importance of the strategic and economic dimensions of water, while also trying to understand how the social constructions of water influence interstate relations. Such a perspective examines the ways in which discursive strategies influence interactions among basin riparians, identifying nodes of water conflict (e.g. a large dam), and exploring how images and representations of political actors shape particular geopolitical orders (Sneddon and Fox, 2006). Extensive research (among others, Zeitoun and Warner, 2006; Daoudy, 2008; Water Policy, 2008; Zeitoun and Mirumachi, 2008; Dinar, 2009; Cascao and Zeitoun, 2010; Zeitoun et al., 2011, 2017; Menga, 2016b; Menga and Mirumachi, 2016) has shown that equal basin riparians may be in fact caught up in control relations, and that asymmetries of riparian power play a role in influencing transboundary water relations. If the absence of war does not mean the absence of conflict or the presence of peace, on the other hand, the signing of a treaty does not mean that cooperation is actually happening (Zeitoun and Mirumachi, 2008). A critical hydropolitics approach is aimed at developing a deeper understanding of key political factors in transboundary water interactions, recognizing the relevance of overt and covert forms of power, discursive processes, and social constructions to the study of water relations. This book will take a similar approach to propose a new analytical tool to study hydropolitics, the Circle of Hydro-Hegemony (hereafter, the CHH). This will serve to argue that water can deeply influence relations among states and shape broader regional dynamics well beyond the “water level.” Central Asia, as this book will explain, is no exception.

Why Central Asia?

Since the five Central Asian republics entered the world stage in 1991, the domestic and international challenges faced by the region have generated considerable attention from researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners. Issues related to the republics' transition to democracy or authoritarianism (Huskey, 1995; Anderson, 1999; Melvin, 2004; Cummings, 2006; Georg-Geiss, 2012), the extent to which the Soviet Union managed to eradicate local traditions and costumes and the tension between formal and informal politics (Cummings, 2002; Collins, 2002, 2004; Schatz, 2005; Isaacs, 2010, 2014), nation-building processes (Bohr, 1998; Akçali, 2004; Matveeva, 2009; Isaacs and Polese, 2016), the security concerns raised by radical Islam (Haghayeghi, 1995; Tazmini, 2001; Trisko, 2005; Montgomery and Heathershaw, 2016) and organised crime (Chalk, 2003; Engvall, 2006; Peyrouse, 2012; De Danieli, 2014), regional cooperation or lack thereof (Bohr, 2004; Rakhimov, 2010; Jacoby, 2013; Collins, 2014; Costa-Buranelli, 2014), personality cults (Cummings, 2002; Lewis, 2008; Polese and Horák, 2015), or the so-called "New Great Game" for the control of the region's abundant hydrocarbon resources (Menon, 2003; Rasizade, 2003; Dinar et al., 2010; Blank, 2012; Kubicek, 2013), have all been widely studied and debated in the fields of politics and IR. And yet, while specialists and scholars tend to agree on the increasingly strategic role that Central Asia plays in global politics (especially following the 2001 US-led campaign to Afghanistan), it is safe to say that the region is still considered as largely unknown and distant in the Western world, as evidenced by the superficial and orientalist accounts embedded in the Western public consciousness (Heathershaw and Megeran, 2011).

One issue, nevertheless, has received in the past, and is still receiving at present, mainstream media attention: the desiccation of the Aral Sea. In the 1960s the world's fourth largest inland water body, it is now almost completely dry (Micklin, 2007), which many consider the worst environmental disaster caused by humans in the twentieth century. The shocking images of shipwrecks laying abandoned and derelict on the Central Asian desert recurrently make headlines, and are often linked with predictions of dystopic futures and imminent water wars. The culprit, it is unanimously accepted, is the Soviet Union, which has been found guilty of ecocide (Feshbach and Friendly, 1992), in the pursuit of the ideal that all water flowing to the ocean (or to the Aral Sea), rather than to irrigated fields, is wasted. The issue has catalysed the attention of international donors with, sadly, negligible results for its restoration. Ferguson's (2003) at times hilarious and yet highly depressing account of one of the many ineffective projects designed to save the shrinking Aral Sea is recommended reading for anyone interested in getting a glimpse of regional water dynamics. As the mayor of Aralsk¹¹ cynically observed in the 1990s, "if every expert who visited the Aral Sea had brought a bucket of water, the Sea would have filled up already" (The World Bank, 2006).

But while the Aral Sea might be, regretfully, considered as a quasi-settled matter, the politics of the eponymous basin are very lively and evolve continuously. The Aral Sea basin is formed by the two large regional rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya. Water in Central Asia flows from the energy-poor upstream countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, to the downstream countries, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, that have significant reserves of oil, gas, and coal. Under Soviet management, the water originating upstream was primarily allocated to irrigation to satisfy the agricultural needs of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and these countries supplied Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with fossil fuels to fulfil their energy needs in return. With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the basin countries had to manage their own international relations and natural resources, and soon focused on pursuing national economic interests and on shifting from a collective to a market economy. When the downstream countries adopted world market prices for gas, oil, and coal, the upstream ones were forced to increase hydroelectricity production releasing water from reservoirs in winter, thus diminishing the quantity of water available for irrigation downstream during summer. Over the last two decades, this incompatibility between water demands of irrigation and hydropower have given rise to a tense confrontation amid the upstream and downstream republics on the use and control of the region's water resources, and this matter remains, as of 2017, unsettled.

The sharing of the waters of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers has deeply marked interstate relations, and this dynamic state of affairs explains perhaps the relatively abundant literature in the social sciences exploring water issues in Central Asia. Previous research has examined the connection between shared water resources and environmental security (Smith, 1995; Chan, 2010), water and nationalism (Allouche, 2005), the inadequacy of the regional water management system and its contribution to regional conflicts (O'Hara, 2000), the economic dependency on cotton and water (Spoor, 1993), the link between climate change and water conflicts (Bernauer and Siegfried, 2012), pessimistic water wars scenarios in the densely populated Ferghana Valley (Krutov and Spoor, 2003) and the extent to which aid agencies are transforming water conflicts therein (Bichsel, 2009), the moral geography of dams (Féaux de la Croix, 2016), the role of water user groups in encouraging collective action (Abdullaev et al., 2010), and the security challenges posed by the water, energy, and food nexus (Granit et al., 2012; Stucki and Sojamo, 2012). But, more than anything else, the existing body of research has attempted to explain how water resources have fostered regional conflict and cooperation in Central Asia (Horsman, 2001; Micklin, 2002; Kemelova and Zhalkubaev, 2003; McKinney, 2003; Weinthal, 2006; Mosello, 2008; Wegerich, 2011; Pak and Wegerich, 2014; Pak et al., 2014).

Notwithstanding the wealth of research on water resources, there is a dearth of scholarship that critically analyses transboundary water relations in Central Asia and the inherent power dynamics involved, and this

is a compelling absence. With the recent formation of its republics and the necessity to overcome the challenges to transboundary water management posed by the cumbersome structural legacy of the Soviet Union, Central Asia offers an excellent platform to examine the regional quest for power and change as it unravelled since 1991. It is for this reason that in this book I will apply a neo-Gramscian lens to examine the layered nature of interstate hegemonic struggles as they materialise into the shared waters of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers. Gramsci's (1975) understanding of history, in terms of becoming (*divenire*) and his conception of hegemony, will be used to illustrate how ruling elites and hydraulic bureaucracies, or "hydrocracies," as they were termed by Molle et al. (2009), wield power to maintain or counter existing hegemonic – or hydro-hegemonic – configurations. In this context, Tajikistan's and Kyrgyzstan's flagship water resources development projects, the Rogun and Kambarata dams, have crystallised the upstream-downstream tensions over the differing preference of water use. Their construction could entail an irreversible change in the status quo that the downstream governments, and especially Uzbekistan, want to maintain unchanged. The Rogun and Kambarata dams thus emerge as nodal points of conflict to examine and understand the hydropolitical hegemonic struggle in Central Asia, as I shall further explain in the following.

Choice of the case studies

The Rogun and Kambarata dams can be considered case studies within the larger case study of the Aral Sea basin. Therefore, while the main area of analysis is the Aral Sea basin in Central Asia and interstate relations among the upstream countries, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the downstream countries, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the specific focus is placed on the political confrontation around the construction of these two large dams and the related power dynamics.

The decision to focus on the issue of large dams rather than on other questions (such as the desiccation of the Aral Sea or water pollution in the Amu Darya or Syr Darya rivers) stems from several considerations. First, water issues in Central Asia have traditionally been centred around water quantity rather than water quality, something that makes large dams and their capacity to alter the water flow particularly relevant. Second, due to their sheer size and their multilevel impact, large dams are as important at the national level as they are at the international one, and this allows an appreciation of the multidimensional nature of the politics of international waters. This is because at the internal level, ruling elites can use dams to shape national identities and gain legitimacy and consent, portraying them as a panacea, a symbol of national pride and honour, of progress and prosperity (Menga, 2015). At the same time, dams also have a foreign dimension, since they often emerge as strategic geopolitical tools used by governments to assert their power and shape their foreign policy (Menga, 2016a). Third, the