

Remarks on Water and Conflict

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Diálogos da Terra No Planeta Água
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I wish first of all to thank Alexander Likhotal, the President of Green Cross International, and Aécio Neves da Cunha, Governor of the State of Minas Gerais, for inviting me to participate in this conference on “Earth Dialogues on the Water Planet.” I am of course very pleased to re-visit my home town of Belo Horizonte, and honoured to meet with some of the world’s leading authorities on sustainable development.

My diplomatic career has focused largely on efforts to advance multilateral goals in such fields as disarmament and the regulation of conventional arms. These are goals found in the Charter of the United Nations and they remain the focus of my efforts as the UN’s High Representative for Disarmament Affairs. Representatives in the various UN institutions that work on these issues—including the First Committee of the General Assembly, the Disarmament Commission, and the Conference on Disarmament—recognize that such goals serve the wider purposes and principles of the United Nations, including the maintenance of international peace and security, the avoidance of the threat and use of force, and the promotion of human welfare.

Now, some might wonder, what is the connection between disarmament and the management of water resources? The answer is that they both represent “global public goods”—benefits that are indivisible throughout the world community. In a speech at Harvard University on 21 October, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon focused on the importance of new progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and disarmament. Progress in disarmament and the regulation of armaments helps to advance many other UN goals—including economic development, protecting the environment, and strengthening the rule of law. Last year, global military spending was over \$1.3 trillion, which raises legitimate questions about opportunity costs—how could such funds, which continue to grow each year, otherwise be used to advance human welfare and protect our global environment?

This new emphasis at the United Nations on the importance of global public goods should surprise no one, given the expanding scope of interdependence in our world today. While people are still organized largely in independent nation states, they are engaged in many more activities that cross national borders, including travel, commerce, and communication. We are becoming increasingly aware of the fundamental unity of humanity and the need to protect our limited natural resources. And there is hardly a global public good in our world today that is more important than the availability of water, a fundamental basis of all life.

We have all heard various commentators refer to the danger of conflicts erupting as a result of disputes both between and within nations over water. Such conflicts are often

called “water wars”. A simple Google search on the internet this month found no less than 284,000 references to this term, with specific references to disputes largely in the Middle East and Africa, but also to other such disputes on virtually all continents.

There are of course many examples from world history, since Neolithic times, of human disputes over water. Typically, they have involved issues relating to some form of harmful action by a state or group within a state, such as the restriction of the flow or the contamination of vitally needed water resources. Yet despite the frequency of water disputes, they have only rarely led to armed conflict between states—at least, so far.

This is quite remarkable, given the extent that states have long competed for access to, or control over, scarce resources that are indispensable to the public welfare. One recent study cited by the Worldwatch Institute has even found that (and I quote) “... no states have gone to war specifically over water resources since the city-states of Lagash and Umma fought each other in the Tigris-Euphrates basin in 2500 BC.”¹

Furthermore, the same study emphasized that this history also shows more examples of cooperation than of conflict. Citing data from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the study reported that “more than 3,600 water treaties were signed from AD 805 to 1984” and that “Since 1820, more than 400 water treaties and other water-related agreements have been signed, with more than half of these concluded in the past 50 years.” Citing these and other data, the study concluded that “the incidence of acute conflict over international water resources is overwhelmed by the rate of cooperation.”²

This is an astonishing conclusion, one with profound implications for future cooperation not just in the field of water resources, but in many other areas involving global public goods. The historical record of international cooperation in seeking to protect water resources has demonstrated the importance of efforts to achieve the peaceful resolution of disputes, one of the most fundamental norms of the UN Charter. This record also underscores the importance of treaties and the rule of law. It shows how cooperative initiatives—such as enhancing the transparency of information about how states are using scarce water resources—can serve as confidence-building measures that will reduce the risk of future armed conflicts. And it also shows the need for infrastructures—especially institutions at the regional, national, and local levels—to assist in the establishment and implementation of water management norms.

¹ Aaron t. Wolf (et al.), “Managing Water Conflict and Cooperation,” in Worldwatch Institute, State of the World 2005 (NY: WW Norton & Co. 2005), p. 84.

² Ibid., p. 84 (all the quotes in this paragraph).

In contrast to the zero-sum calculations of earlier times—when one nation’s gain often came at another’s expense—the history of cooperation on water resource issues may offer an attractive model to guide the evolution of international politics in other areas as well, toward forms of engagement and cooperation that produce positive-sum results or mutual gain. In short, the lessons of cooperation in this field may provide useful clues for what is needed to achieve the full potential of that elusive goal of “cooperative security”.

It is of course impossible to predict whether this long-term, general trend of cooperation will prevail in the future in the governance of the world’s water resources. The national, sub-regional, and regional impacts of global warming upon fresh water resources cannot be reliably predicted, though one can easily comprehend the disastrous human and economic effects that may well be in store. It is always possible that governments can fall and new policies could emerge that emphasize some of the older, more tragic approaches, including the resort to unilateralism, zero-sum policies, and the pursuit of military solutions to political disputes.

We also cannot predict which scientific and technological developments may occur in the years ahead. Some may be extraordinarily positive, like revolutionary new ways of eliminating pollution or economically producing large volumes of desalinated water. Yet any resort to military force to seize or control water resources will surely continue to remain a potential threat, one well worth the attention of all states. Speaking last January in Davos at the World Economic Forum, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon expressed his particular concern about the consequences of water shortages:

They cause social hardship and impede development. They create tensions in conflict-prone regions. Too often, where we need water we find guns.

I am proud that many of the steps forward to a more cooperative approach to the world’s water resources and related climate challenges have flowed from approaches that were developed or advocated in various UN arenas. These of course include the Earth Summits in Rio in 1992 and 1997, building on the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development (often called the Brundtland Commission) in 1987, which addressed the theme of sustainable development and which the General Assembly welcomed. Last December, the Secretary-General issued a strong personal appeal at the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali, saying that the world was “at a crossroad, with one path leading toward a new global climate agreement, and the other toward a betrayal of our planet and our children.”

These initiatives pertaining to global public goods, and many others I cannot summarize today, testify to how the UN has had to adapt to changing demands and circumstances. Though one cannot find the words “water” or “environment” in the Charter, the UN has still proven its relevance by serving as a central forum for developing and maintaining global norms to guide the actions of our member states.

Most of the work of implementing such norms, however, is the responsibility of its member states and local governments. The Millennium Declaration of 2000, for example, called for the development of “water management strategies at the regional, national and local levels” to stop the unsustainable exploitation of water resources.

The avenues for South/South cooperation in achieving such goals are numerous and expanding. Last July, the 15th Ministerial Conference of the members of the Non-Aligned Movement identified the need for greater progress in water resource management, including pollution prevention, capacity-building, and knowledge-sharing. Such cooperation can take many forms, including the coordination of speeches and votes in key multilateral arenas, including the UN General Assembly and at major international environmental summit meetings. This work is essential in promoting further assistance in capacity building at the local level. The achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, especially with respect to water, depends heavily upon such cooperation—cooperation that will both improve both the quality of life and human security.

The fact that the Government of Minas Gerais, Green Cross International, and Green Cross Brazil have jointly organized this conference offers evidence that such global norms have acquired some deep roots both inside states and in civil society. In many ways, the future of the world will depend on how deep these roots will grow and the impact they will register upon the policies and practices of states.

I wish to conclude by congratulating the organizers of this Conference for their commitment to the pursuit of the common good, and specifically for their recognition of the many ways that cooperation in water resource management can serve both to improve standards of living worldwide and to strengthen international peace and security.