

The Durability of International Water Treaties

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In the 21st century, it is possible that international water treaties will be more durable than national borders and traditional political alliances.

Freshwater is arguably the most critical natural resource on earth. A human (and most animals) can't survive more than a few days without it. So protecting a nation's freshwater supply must be among its highest priorities, if not the highest.

There are roughly 300 international basins—rivers and lakes that either cross or demarcate international political boundaries, according to Oregon State University's College of Earth, Ocean, and Atmospheric Sciences. (There are also hundreds of transnational aquifers.) Europe has 69 international basins, Africa has 59, Asia 57, North America 40, and South America 38. The Danube River is the most shared of all, with 17 co-riparian nations.

You can see maps of the world's international basins in the *Atlas of International Freshwater Agreements*. [http://transboundarywater.geo.orst.edu/publications/atlas/atlas_html/interagree.html]

International water treaties, agreements, accords, resolutions, and compacts are crucial to protecting each country's water supply and mitigating conflict. "Issues of increasing water scarcity, degrading water quality, rapid population growth, unilateral water development, and uneven levels of economic development are...potentially disruptive factors in co-riparian water relations," wrote Meredith A. Giordano and Aaron T. Wolf in 2002.* "The combination of these factors has led academics and policy-makers alike to warn of impending conflict over shared water resources." Between 1948 and 2002, there were 37 international incidents of violent conflicts over water, according to Giordano and Wolf (30 of *these* events were between Israel and one or another of its neighbors, the last of which occurred in 1970).

Co-riparian states have nevertheless "demonstrated a remarkable ability to cooperate over their shared water supplies," Giordano and Wolf wrote in the *Atlas of International Freshwater Agreements*. Here are two very impressive examples:

- The establishment of the Indus Water Commission in 1960 between India and Pakistan...fostered remarkably resilient bilateral cooperation over water, despite two wars and continued political turmoil between the two states.
- The Mekong River Committee, established in 1957 among the four lower riparian states of Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, also weathered extreme political conditions

and resulted in continued water-related data exchange by the member states, even during the Vietnam War.

Giordano [<http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/about/staff-list/meredith-giordano/>] is senior researcher at the International Water Management Institute in Washington, DC. Wolf [<http://www.transboundarywaters.orst.edu/about/wolf.html>] is project director for OSU's Program in Water Conflict Management and Transformation.

Between 1948 and 2002, approximately 295 international water agreements were negotiated and signed. (According to Wolf, the history of international water treaties dates as far back as 2500 BC, when the two Sumerian city-states of Lagash and Umma crafted an agreement ending a water dispute along the Tigris River.)

Where international water institutions exist...relations among riparian states are generally more cooperative than in basins without treaties or other cooperative management mechanisms. This situation holds true even in basins with high levels of infrastructural development, an otherwise conflict-prone setting.

Global climate change will continue to intensify drought in some regions and flooding (and salination) in other areas. Further depletion and contamination of freshwater resources will make riparian rights more and more valuable and attractive. Climate migration—massive population shifts from water-poor to water-rich areas—will severely stress national borders and reorient international alliances around water agreements rather than traditional political relationships. Today's durable water-sharing treaties, agreements, and compacts will be tomorrow's political alliances.

* Meredith A. Giordano and Aaron T. Wolf, "The World's International Freshwater Agreements," published in *Atlas of International Freshwater Agreements*, edited by Aaron T. Wolf, U.N. Environment Programme and Oregon State University (Nairobi, Kenya), UNEP Press, page 184, 2002.

About the author

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