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Exploiting the Commons: Risks to shared Global Spaces

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The more urgent risk to shared global spaces today is not the slow erosion of overuse. It's not just accidental or natural rather it's intentional. Some states deliberately take control of shared resources, limit others' access to them, and even use them as tools to gain power or influence. In simple terms, it's about controlling what should belong to everyone and turning it into a strategic advantage. Things that were once shared and managed for everyone's benefit are now being shaped by rivalry and tension. The global commons such as trade routes, shared rivers, energy pathways,

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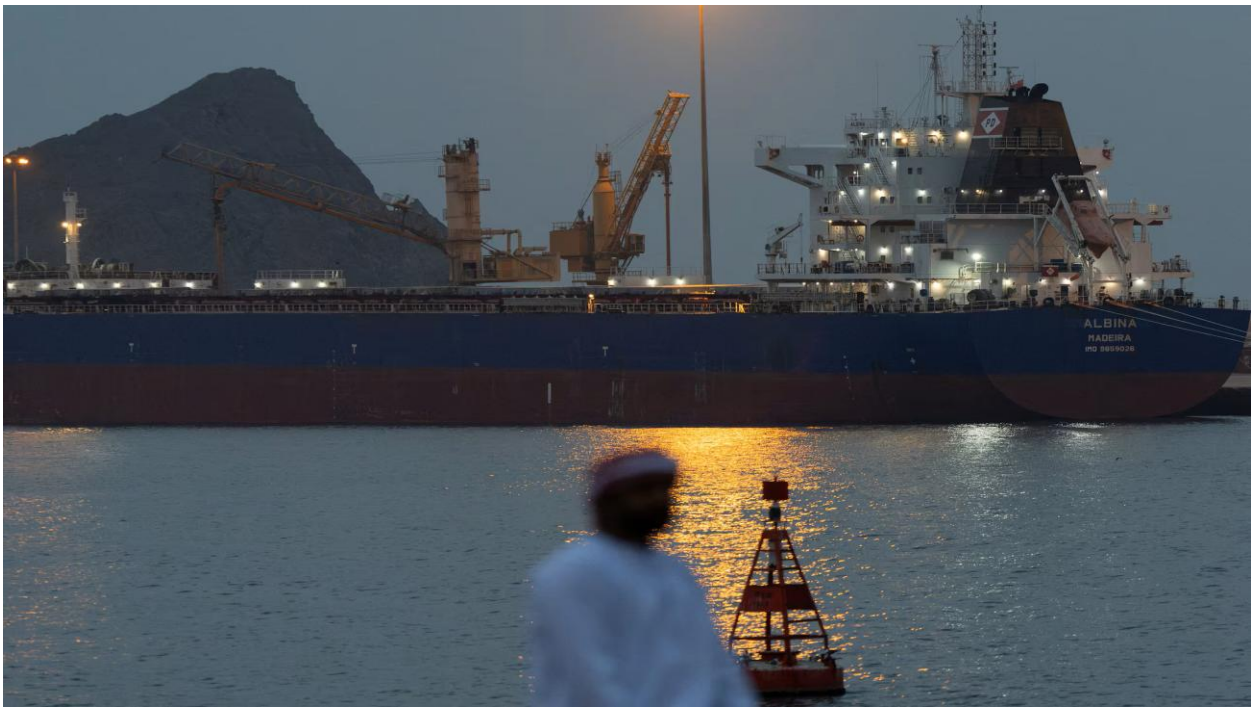
and underground minerals are no longer seen simply as resources to cooperate over. Instead, they are increasingly being treated as tools that powerful states can use to pressure or control others. The world is already facing this crisis. Critical maritime chokepoints are leveraged to influence global trade flows; transboundary rivers are managed not only for development but for downstream pressure; energy corridors are politicized through supply manipulation; and the seabed is emerging as the next frontier of strategic extraction. Even outer space and cyberspace once framed as open and neutral are now arenas where access can be restricted, disrupted, or weaponized. Over time, all of this is changing the very nature of shared resources. What used to be lifelines for everyone is now turning into something countries compete over and fight to control. The deeper fractures in global governance, insufficiency in existing legal regimes and multilateral frameworks, particularly where enforcement is weak and strategic incentives are high are responsible for this shift. These gaps allow the major powers and regional actors to exploit these gaps. However, the concern is not only about unequal access, but systemic instability. Control over the commons increasingly translates into control over economic security, technological infrastructure, and political autonomy.

Strategic Maritime Routes and Chokepoints

Maritime chokepoints have become acute pressure points in recent conflicts. The world has experienced severe impacts from the conflicts in these regions. Any disruptions in the chokepoints can significantly affect the flow of global trade. In late 2023, Yemen's Houthi militia has targeted commercial vessels using missiles and drones in the Bab al Mandeb strait, forcing rerouting and sharply reducing traffic through the Suez Canal by over 50% in some periods[2]. These disruptions have increased freight costs and strained global supply chains. In the Persian Gulf, Iran has leveraged its geographic control over the Strait of Hormuz. This corridor alone is responsible for roughly 20% of global oil flows and energy supply. As a result, the energy supply has been disrupting in the whole world. In 2026, Tehran imposed de facto transit controls by requiring vessels to seek permission and pay fees, prompting international condemnation as a violation of

[2] Noam Raydan and Farzin Nadimi, "Houthi Shipping Attacks: Patterns and Expectations for 2025," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 16, 2024, accessed here.

maritime law[3] [4]. This has significantly reduced tanker traffic and contributed to global energy volatility.



Source: Reuters

In response, the US has been attempting naval operations to secure shipping lanes. This militarization of sea lanes increases the risk of escalation while raising insurance costs and operational uncertainty. Meanwhile, piracy in the Strait of Malacca adds a criminal dimension, further complicating maritime governance.

Transboundary Water Governance and Disputes

Shared river systems are increasingly politicized. The upstream states use infrastructure and flow control as leverage. The Nile basin remains a prominent example. Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, completed in 2023, has increased tensions with downstream Egypt. Egypt relies

[3] Mark Nevitt, "Continuing Crisis in the Strait of Hormuz: Why Iran's Hold Is Illegal and U.S. Military Force Alone Fails," *Just Security*, April 8, 2026, https://www.justsecurity.org/135899/strait-hormuz-tolls-crisis/.
[4] "Video: GCC Chief Says Iran Charging for Ships to Pass Strait of Hormuz," *Al Jazeera*, March 26, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/video/newsfeed/2026/3/26/video-gcc-chief-says-iran-charging-for-ships-to-pass-strait-of-hormuz.

on the Nile River for about 97% of its water, so any change in the river's flow is seen as a serious concern for its water security [5]. Disagreements over how the dam should be operated and how floods should be managed have deepened mistrust, especially since there is still no binding agreement in place. In South Asia, tensions have also grown around the Indus Waters Treaty—long seen as one of the most durable water-sharing arrangements. Its suspension in 2025 signaled a serious breakdown. India's move to stop sharing data and hint at more upstream projects has been viewed by Pakistan as a form of weaponizing water.[6]. Elsewhere, Turkey's dam-building on the Euphrates and Tigris and China's upstream control over the Mekong have generated similar concerns. In the South China Sea competition over territorial claims intersect with control over critical sea lanes and resources. China's construction of artificial islands and militarization of disputed features has enabled it to assert de facto control over large portions of the sea, despite the 2016 arbitral ruling rejecting its expansive claims under UNCLOS[7]. These actions have raised concerns among Southeast Asian states and external powers about freedom of navigation, access to fisheries, and potential hydrocarbon resources.

Energy Geopolitics

Energy systems particularly oil, gas, and pipelines remain central to geopolitical leverage. Russia's reduction of gas exports to Europe following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the strategic use of supply dependence. Europe, which previously relied on Russia for about 40% of its gas, faced severe disruptions, prompting diversification efforts[8]. Sanctions and countermeasures have further politicized energy markets. Western embargoes on Russian and Iranian energy exports have triggered retaliatory actions, including Iran's control over Hormuz. Infrastructure vulnerabilities are also evident: the sabotage of Nord Stream pipelines and

[5] Alessia Melcangi, "The Nile at a Crossroads: Navigating the GERD Dispute as Egypt's Floodwaters Rise," *Atlantic Council*, November 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-nile-at-a-crossroads-navigating-the-gerd-dispute-as-egypts-floodwaters-rise/.
[6] "Unprecedented crisis': Pakistan cries in UN over India's decision to keep Indus Water Treaty in abeyance," *The Economic Times*, January 22, 2026, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/unprecedented-crisis-pakistan-cries-in-un-over-indias-decision-to-keep-indus-water-treaty-in-abeyance/articleshow/127106690.cms.
[7] "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," *Global Conflict Tracker*, Council on Foreign Relations, accessed April 18, 2026, https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea.
[8] Samual Gross and Constanze Stelzenmüller, "Europe's Messy Russian Gas Divorce," *Brookings Institution*, June 18, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/europes-messy-russian-gas-divorce/.

cyberattacks like the Colonial Pipeline incident highlight the susceptibility of energy systems to both state and non-state actors.

Emerging domains such as the Arctic add another layer. Russia's control over the Northern Sea Route, including permit requirements and fees, reflects efforts to transform new global commons into regulated national corridors.

Critical Minerals and Supply Chains

Critical minerals essential for clean energy, defense, and digital technologies have become another key instruments of economic coercion. Supply chains are highly concentrated, with China dominating rare-earth processing and magnet production. Since 2023, China has imposed a series of export controls on strategic materials including gallium, germanium, graphite, and rare earth elements. In April 2025, restrictions on heavy rare earths significantly disrupted global supply, causing price spikes and industrial slowdowns[9] [10].

The Architecture of Coercion

These dynamics has created an architecture of coercion built on control over shared resources. Physical geography is increasingly being converted into political leverage. Control over strategic nodes enables states to exert disproportionate influence over far larger and more dispersed economies. This is not just about short-term advantage or opportunism instead it shows is a long-term strategy, where countries invest in controlling key locations or routes so they can build lasting influence. In a world where countries depend on each other, this kind of control can later be used as a powerful tool to pressure or shape others' choices. This form of coercion is also being normalized in global politics. In the past, actions like limiting access to critical minerals, controlling energy supplies, or threatening important sea routes have often not led to strong or lasting punishment at the global level. As the consequences seem limited, countries begin to see

[9] International Energy Agency, "With New Export Controls on Critical Minerals, Supply Concentration Risks Become Reality," *IEA Commentary*, October 23, 2025, https://www.iea.org/commentaries/with-new-export-controls-on-critical-minerals-supply-concentration-risks-become-reality/.

[10] Abhisri Nath and Jeffrey D. Bean, "China's Critical Mineral Export Controls: Background & Chokepoints," ORF America, April 22, 2025, https://orfamerica.org/newresearch/chinas-critical-mineral-export-controls/

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these actions as less risky. Over time, this lowers the hesitation to use such tactics and makes coercion a more normal part of how states conduct foreign policy.

Security Implications

The immediate effects of commons weaponization is that the dominant actors are able to impose disproportionate costs on others while absorbing relatively limited consequences themselves. In this situation, global interdependence is no longer keeping countries stable or cooperative. Instead, it is sometimes encouraging competition and pressure. Because many states rely on the same resources and supply routes, some actors try to gain leverage by controlling or threatening these links. At the same time, control over shared resources is slowly breaking the global commons into separate spheres of influence. Regional powers are increasingly strengthening their control over nearby seas, energy routes, and resource-rich areas, managing access based on their own strategic interests instead of shared global rules. As a result, the system is becoming more fragmented. Different actors claim overlapping areas, boundaries are often unclear, and misunderstandings become more likely. Instead of common, widely accepted rules, governance is becoming more local, uneven, and contested.

Another major change is that non-state groups are now playing a bigger role in disrupting important global flows. The attacks in the Red Sea showed that relatively cheap tools like drones and precision weapons can be used by such groups to disrupt major trade routes. This makes it easier for different actors to carry out coercion, leading to more frequent and less predictable disruptions, while also making it more expensive to protect global supply chains. At the same time, critical infrastructure has become more vulnerable. Systems like energy grids, ports, and water supplies now serve both everyday civilian needs and strategic purposes. Cyberattacks and targeted sabotage show how these systems can be harmed without traditional warfare. This blurs the line between economic activity and security competition, creating new kinds of instability. Countries are now in a position where they must both defend and potentially use the same interconnected systems for strategic advantage.

Economic Implications

The weaponization of shared resources is not only causing short-term disruption but also changing how the global economy works. Supply chains that once focused on being cheap and efficient are now being rebuilt to focus on safety and stability. This means companies and countries are adding backup options, spreading suppliers across different places, and moving production closer to home. While this reduces risk, it also makes goods more expensive and the whole system less efficient. Over time, this shift could slow global economic growth. Prices of key goods like energy and critical minerals are also increasingly influenced by political risk. When supply is controlled by a few actors, they can indirectly raise costs for others. These higher costs are becoming a regular part of global markets, not just temporary shocks. Governments are also spending more to protect themselves by building reserves and investing in domestic production. While this improves security, it takes money away from other useful areas like development and public services. The impact is not equal. Richer countries can better manage these changes, but poorer and import-dependent countries are much more exposed. For them, disruptions in energy, food, and trade can quickly turn into serious economic and social problems.

Normative and Institutional Implications

The growing "weaponization" of shared resources is slowly weakening the rules-based international system. On paper, international laws still exist, but in practice they are often ignored by powerful states. This creates a trust problem: countries that depend on these rules for protection cannot be sure they will actually be enforced, which makes global cooperation weaker over time. International institutions that manage shared resources are also becoming less effective. Instead of working through global agreements, states are more often using unilateral actions or limited bilateral deals. These institutions are not disappearing, but their role is shrinking, as cooperation becomes weaker and less binding. At the same time, more resources are being treated as security issues. Things like energy, minerals, water, and trade routes are increasingly seen as strategic assets. This pushes countries to focus on control and deterrence rather than cooperation, and it also encourages others to respond in the same way, increasing tensions. There is also a key gap in the system: international laws exist, but they are not strongly enforced. Because of this, some states

treat legal rules as flexible rather than binding. The real problem is not the lack of rules, but the lack of power to make sure everyone follows them.

Conclusion

The use of shared global resources as tools of pressure is changing how the international system itself works. This shift affects the economy, security, global rules, and fairness all at the same time, and these effects are building on each other. This conflict is not unique, in the past, the world has gone through similar challenges and still managed to adapt. However, what makes it different than other times is that the rule based order is collapsing; agreement among major powers is breaking down, and the ability or willingness to enforce rules is less certain. What is at stake is not merely the efficient functioning of global supply chains or the stability of commodity prices. It is the foundational premise that shared spaces exist for shared benefit that the oceans, the great rivers, the energy networks, and the mineral endowment of the planet are resources whose governance must ultimately serve all who depend on them, not merely those with the power to monopolize them. Overall, the system is moving away from cooperation and shared management toward competition and control. If this trend continues, global commons may no longer function as shared lifelines, but instead become sources of tension and instability.