

The Posterior Battlefield: Will Water Replace Oil as the World's Most Altered Resource?

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Introduction

For more than a century, oil has been one of the most contested resources in international politics and the global theatre of conflict has been set against a backdrop of oil rigs and pipelines. Its enormous economic value, uneven geographical distribution, and crucial role in transportation, industry and military power have made it a major concern of states. Oil demonstrates how a natural resource can become more than a commodity, and become a strategic asset whose control effects national power and international security. However, another resource is quietly obtaining similar strategic importance- water.

Although, unlike oil, water is not scarce everywhere and it is not traded as a commodity. The problem is that usable fresh water is unevenly distributed, increasingly stressed and often shared across political borders. Around 60% of the world's fresh water flows through transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers, while 153 countries have territory within at least one transboundary basin or aquifer system. In today's geopolitical arena, controlling waterways and water bodies has appeared as a strategic weapon for many states through which they can influence and subdue other states politically and economically. Under the conditions of scarcity, strategic importance and geopolitical stress, rivers, aquifers, reservoirs and dams are considered as vital national security assets and this can drive states to strengthen their grips on water sources which can ultimately result into the next generation of geopolitical competition and conflict. However, the future is possible, not inevitable. The eventuality of future conflicts for water depends on how states respond to the concerning issue today.

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Why Water is Becoming a Strategic Resource?

Water is unique because, unlike energy, it has no substitute. While a state can shift from oil to solar or nuclear power, there is no “renewable” alternative to a drinkable cup of water or a fertile field. However, its strategic significance comes not just from utility or scarcity, but from the combination of scarcity, necessity and geographical dependence.

The most certain and influential factor is increasing water stress. The IPCC estimates that roughly half of the world’s population currently experiences severe water scarcity for at least one month each year because of climatic and non-climatic factors (IPCC, 2022)². Agriculture, energy production, health and livelihoods are already being affected by water scarcity. Experts expect the situation to become more difficult. According to WRI, global water demand is projected to rise by 20-25 percent by 2050, while an additional one billion people could face extreme water stress. This is particularly important because water demand is not optional: people need water for drinking and sanitation, farmers need it for food production, and industries and energy systems require it for production and cooling (WRI, 2023)³. Therefore, water scarcity can quickly become a food-security problem. Water is consequently linked to food security in much the same way that oil is linked to energy security.

The following factor is geographical inequality. Water is not evenly distributed across the world. Some regions have adequate water sources, while others experience chronic scarcity. This creates a fundamental distinction between water and oil. Oil can be transported from one continent to another through pipelines, ships and other infrastructure. Freshwater can also be transported, but moving enormous quantities over long distances is generally expensive and technically difficult. Consequently, access to water is sharply pledged to geography. This makes rivers particularly important. A state located upstream can influence the amount and timing of water reaching states

² IPCC. 2022. “Climate Change 2022 Working Group II Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.”

https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_SummaryVolume.pdf.

³ Boehm, Sophie. 2023. “State of Climate Action 2023.” *Www.Wri.Org*. <https://www.wri.org/research/state-climate-action-2023>.

downstream. Dams can provide electricity, irrigation and flood control; nevertheless, they can also change downstream water availability. Thus, a river can become a source of asymmetric geopolitical power by creating dependence and vulnerability, ultimately resulting in political leverage.

Lastly, water is increasingly recognized as the “resource behind all resources”. It is often forgotten that oil, mine minerals, or processing the rare earth elements needed for high-tech industries are not feasible without massive amounts of water. In the Maghreb, for example, Libya’s vast “fossil water” reserves may soon prove to be as strategically important as its famous oil fields because no economy can function without reliable access to it. Without water, even the wealthiest energy states find their industrial foundations crumbling. This strategic and economic value is most intense in what experts call the “saltwater kingdoms” of the Gulf⁴. Countries like Kuwait, Oman, and the UAE have transformed themselves into global superpowers of man-made water, relying on desalination for up to 90% of their drinking supply. While this technology has allowed cities to bloom in the desert, it has also created an extreme, existential vulnerability. Because these nations often have only a few weeks of water in storage, their desalination plants are not just utilities; they are the most valuable and fragile targets in their entire national infrastructure⁵.

Thus, water sources can act like both strength and vulnerability for states, while being the utmost crucial resource for the planet. Water can take a state to an advantageous position in international politics; the very same resource can put a state in a dangerous position in terms of national security. It has the capability to create power imbalance, asymmetrical interdependence, geopolitical inequality and strategic diplomatic relationship among the states. All these intricate yet intense attributes combined with deficit make water an extensively strategic resource.

⁴ Paddison, Laura. 2026. “There’s a Commodity Even More Vital than Oil and Gas in the Middle East - and It’s at Risk as War Heats Up.” CNN Climate. March 11, 2026. <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/03/11/climate/gulf-iran-war-water-desalination>.

⁵ Laryssa McGlashon. 2026. “Changing the Currents of Conflict: Oil, Water, and the Flows Reshaping the Middle East.” NAOC. May 2, 2026. <https://natoassociation.ca/changing-the-currents-of-conflict-oil-water-and-the-flows-reshaping-the-middle-east/>.

Water and Geopolitical Competition

Competition over water is not an entirely hypothetical future scenario as states already compete over rivers, dams, and water-sharing arrangements. However, competition over water and armed conflict over water are two distinct things. Existing evidence suggests that states frequently manage water competition through negotiation and institutions rather than war⁶. Countries sharing water have an incentive to cooperate because destroying or permanently disrupting a shared water system can harm everyone⁷. This is why the future of water geopolitics may depend on whether states interpret water as a shared resource or a zero-sum resource.

Nevertheless, water sharing can be a matter of contention when geographical dependence and unequal distribution come in a scenario where two states already have contradictory national interests. The Nile Basin provides one of the clearest examples. Ethiopia's construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile has generated a prolonged dispute with Egypt and Sudan. The dam is primarily a development and electricity-generation project for Ethiopia. But for Egypt, the matter is directly connected to water security as the country depends heavily on the Nile. The dispute expounds how one river can represent different national priorities: development for an upstream country and security of supply for a downstream country. Moreover, the strategic problem is not simply the existence of the dam; rather, it is the possibility that control over infrastructure upstream could affect the quantity and timing of water available downstream.

⁶ "Water for Prosperity and Peace." 2026. Unesco.Org. June 22, 2026.
<https://www.unesco.org/en/reports/wwdr/2024>.

⁷ Moller, Lars C. 2005. "Sharing Transboundary Rivers Fairly and Efficiently." ResearchGate. January 2005.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242115697_Sharing_Transboundary_Rivers_Fairly_and_Efficiently.



Source: The Economist

The history of the Middle East portrays that water is often a silent but driving factor of war. The struggle over the Jordan, Litani, and Yarmuk rivers was a major cause of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, as nations fought to control the headwaters that sustain their people⁸. Even today, the “hydraulic imperative” shapes borders; Israel’s control over the West Bank is deeply bound to protecting the aquifers that supply its coastal cities, often through military regulations that prevent Palestinians from drilling their own wells.

However, guns and bombs do not always symbolize the antagonism; it’s often about institutionalized power imbalances. In many shared river basins, the “stronger” neighbor can exercise a de facto veto over how water is used, creating long-term resentment. Enduring umbrage and power asymmetry influence competition and hostility to sustain longer, eventually leading to conflict and violence.

⁸ Cooley, John K. 1984. “The War Over Water.” 1984. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148352>.

Climate Change: A Threat-Multiplier

Climate change does not just make the world hotter; it acts as a “threat multiplier” that takes existing social and political tensions and pushes them over the edge. Climate change is unlikely to create water conflicts by itself. But it could be the factor that determines whether today’s water competition remains manageable or becomes significantly more dangerous. It turns peaceful competition into violence by making a scarce resource even more unpredictable. The most tragic example of this is Syria, where a devastating drought between 2006 and 2011 led to agricultural failure and mass migration, nurturing the seeds of social unrest that eventually influenced and intensified the civil war in the country⁹.

This cascading effect creates what experts call “social resource scarcity”¹⁰. The real danger is not just that there is less rain, but that our societies lack the adaptive capacity or the ingenuity to change how they manage that water. When a government cannot provide basic water services due to climate shocks, the social contract breaks. This leads to mass displacement and migration, which then puts even more pressure on the resources of neighboring regions, potentially sparking wider conflicts.

The relationship between climate change and water is predominantly about uncertainty. Changing rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, glacier loss, rising temperature and shifting river flows can make freshwater availability unpredictable. The IPCC has found that climate change is already affecting the global water cycle. It is altering precipitation patterns, increasing the risks of drought and flooding and affecting water availability in different regions. The IPCC estimates that roughly half of the world’s population experiences severe water scarcity for at least part of the year, while climate change is expected to intensify water-related risks in many regions (IPCC, 2022)¹¹.

⁹ “Did Climate Change Help Spark The Syrian War? | Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory.” 2026. Columbia.Edu. August 5, 2026. <https://lamont.columbia.edu/news/did-climate-change-help-spark-syrian-war?>

¹⁰ Ohlsson, L. 2000. “Water Conflicts and Social Resource Scarcity.” *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth, Part B: Hydrology, Oceans and Atmosphere* 25 (3): 213–20. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1464-1909\(00\)00006-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1464-1909(00)00006-X).

¹¹ IPCC. 2022. “Climate Change 2022 Working Group II Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.” https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_SummaryVolume.pdf.

This uncertainty becomes geopolitically significant when water crosses borders. A country that depends on an upstream river may already be vulnerable to decisions made outside its territory. Climate change can deepen that vulnerability. During periods of drought, an upstream state may face pressure to retain more water for its own population, agriculture or energy production. A downstream state, however, may interpret the same action as a threat to its national security. Within comparatively stable conditions, both countries can negotiate an agreement based on expected flows. But if climate change makes those flows increasingly unpredictable, the agreement becomes harder to maintain. The ongoing dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) illustrates this dynamic. While the disagreement between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan predates many climate impacts, increasing climate variability has made the management of Nile more sensitive. During drought years, decisions regarding the filling and operation of the dam become even more politically significant because every reduction in river flow carries greater consequences for downstream users¹². Climate change, therefore, has not created the dispute, but it has increased the importance of reaching cooperative arrangements. Thus, climate stress can transform a natural shortage into a political dispute over access and control.

This is why water scarcity should be understood as a threat multiplier rather than an automatic cause of war. Scarcity does not suddenly push peaceful countries towards violence; rather, it intensifies existing contradictions and vulnerabilities. UNESCO's 2024 World Water Development Report similarly stresses that water scarcity, inequality and poor management can increase tensions, while equitable management and cooperation can support peace and prosperity¹³. The danger is therefore greatest where water scarcity intersects with pre-existing geopolitical rivalry, weak institutions, poverty and unequal access.

¹² Othmani, Slim. 2026. "Water: The Strategic Resource of the 21st Century." *New African*. June 22, 2026.
<https://newafricanmagazine.com/opinion/water-the-strategic-resource-of-the-21st-century/>.

¹³ "Water for Prosperity and Peace." 2026. *Unesco.Org*. June 22, 2026.
<https://www.unesco.org/en/reports/wwdr/2024>.

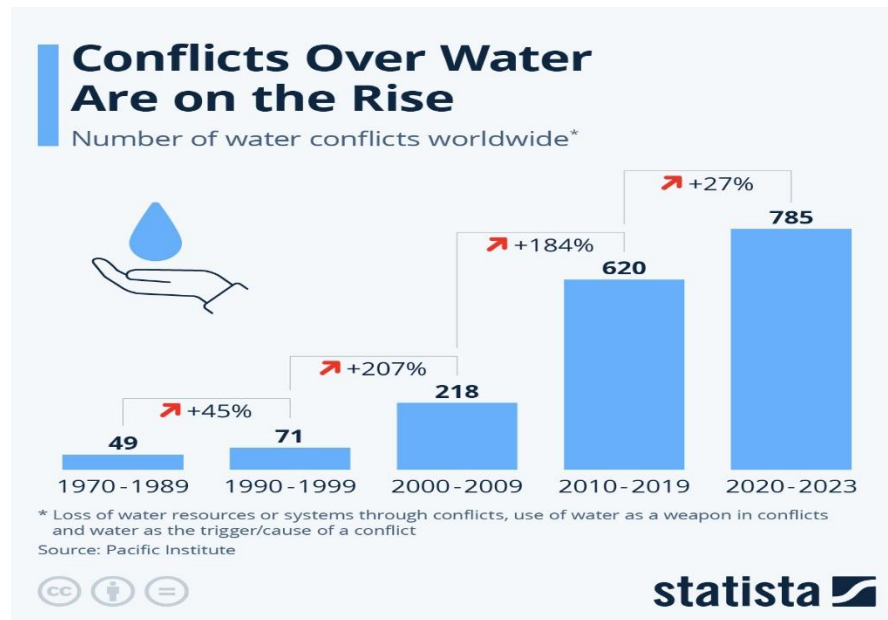
Will Water be the Most Disputed Resource After Oil?

Scarcity combined with unequal distribution can work as a matter of dispute in international politics; if some countries have abundant fresh water while others face severe shortages, access to water can become a source of contention and strategic dependence.

Whether water will become the most contested resource after oil depends less on the existence of scarcity itself than on how scarcity changes the strategic behavior of states¹⁴. Water is already scarce in many parts of the world, but scarcity alone has not produced a global pattern of interstate conflict. The more important question is whether future conditions can transform water from a resource that states negotiate over into a resource that states feel compelled to secure, control and, in extreme circumstances, confront others over.

The possibility becomes more plausible when water is viewed not simply as a commodity but as a strategic geographical asset. Oil is valuable because states depend on its supply, but water has an additional characteristic: it is indispensable for human survival and has no complete substitute. There is no replacement for the biological necessity of water. A state can diversify its energy sources; it cannot diversify away from the need for freshwater. This gives water a unique strategic character. If freshwater becomes sufficiently scarce, the importance of controlling a river basin, aquifer, reservoir or upstream watershed could increase sharply. In such a situation, the object of competition may not be water itself but secure and uninterrupted access to water.

¹⁴ Yeager, Patrick. 2025. "Why Future Wars Will Be Fought over Water Supply." LOWY Institute. August 26, 2025. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-future-wars-will-be-fought-over-water-supply>.



Source: Pacific Institute

This is where the future of water geopolitics could begin to resemble the geopolitics of oil. Oil-producing regions became strategically important because control over production and transportation could influence the security of other states. Water could develop a comparable logic through hydrological dependence. A downstream country that relies heavily on a river originating elsewhere may be vulnerable to decisions made upstream. The more limited alternative sources become, the greater that vulnerability becomes. Control over dams, diversion infrastructure and upstream flows could consequently acquire greater geopolitical value. The conflict over Mekong River Basin illustrates a suitable example. China's extensive dam construction on the upper reaches has raised concerns among downstream countries, particularly Cambodia and Vietnam, over changing river flows, fisheries and agricultural productivity. While China argues that the dams contribute to flood control and energy production, downstream states worry that increasing upstream control could translate into greater political influence during periods of water stress.

Yet there is a major difference between the two resources. Oil can be extracted, stored and transported across long distances through a global market. Water is far more geographically embedded. Rivers, aquifers and watersheds cannot simply be relocated when political relations deteriorate. This makes water competition less about global trade and more about territorial geography and interdependence. The future water struggle may therefore not resemble the

competition for oil fields; it may resemble competition over the strategic spaces through which water flows.

The critical issue is whether this interdependence produces cooperation or confrontation. History provides evidence for both possibilities. Shared water does not automatically generate conflict¹⁵. UNESCO notes that disputes over transboundary water are commonly addressed through dialogue, negotiation and cooperation when appropriate legal frameworks and institutions exist. Water can even create incentives for cooperation because states that share a river are often better off managing the resource jointly than attempting to monopolize it.

The danger emerges when cooperation fails to keep pace with scarcity. UNESCO and UNECE reported in 2024 that 153 countries depend on transboundary waters, yet only 28 percent had effective arrangements covering most of their shared waters¹⁶. This gap becomes more significant as climate change makes droughts and floods more intense and less predictable.

The future could therefore produce a water-security dilemma. If one state invests heavily in dams, reservoirs or water diversion to protect its future supply, another state may interpret that action as a threat to its own security. Defensive water policies could then encourage countermeasures, increasing mistrust even when neither side initially seeks confrontation. Climate change can intensify this dilemma by making states less confident that enough water will remain available for everyone.

This does not mean that “water wars” are inevitable. In fact, the more realistic possibility is a gradual escalation from scarcity to competition, competition to political pressure, and political pressure to strategic confrontation. Armed conflict would represent the extreme end of this process, not its natural or inevitable outcome. The IPCC similarly identifies water insecurity as a problem intensified by both climate change and inadequate governance, noting that water insecurity can contribute to social unrest where inequality is high and institutions are weak.

¹⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross. n.d. “War and Water.” Ircwash.

¹⁶ “Reporting under SDG Indicator 6.5.2 On Transboundary Water Cooperation.” 2024. Unesco.Org. October 2, 2024. <https://www.unesco.org/en/ihp/transboundary-water-cooperation-reporting?>

The real strategic turning point would come when states begin to perceive water access not merely as an environmental or economic concern but as a core national-security requirement. If rivers become increasingly unreliable, groundwater reserves decline, alternative sources become inaccessible and existing agreements fail to guarantee supply, governments may begin to view control over water infrastructure and strategic watersheds as essential to national survival. A similar pattern exists in South Asia. The Indus Waters Treaty has survived several wars and decades of hostility between India and Pakistan, yet water remains politically sensitive. Following major security crises, political leaders in both countries have periodically questioned the future of the treaty, reflecting how water can become intertwined with broader geopolitical tensions. The issue is therefore not simply about river management; it is about whether shared water resources can continue to be insulated from political rivalry.

At that point, water could become “the next oil”- not because it would be traded like oil, but because access to it could become a source of geopolitical power¹⁷. The future water battlefield may therefore emerge not from the simple disappearance of freshwater, but from the combination of scarcity, dependence, strategic geography and declining cooperation.

The question is ultimately a race between scarcity and diplomacy. If institutions adapt faster than water insecurity grows, competition can remain manageable. If scarcity advances faster than cooperation, today’s water disputes could evolve into tomorrow’s major geopolitical confrontations.

Conclusion

The twentieth century has demonstrated how competition for strategic resources can shape the international order. Oil became the foundation of economic growth, military capability and geopolitical influence, turning energy security into one of the defining concerns of global politics. The twenty-first century may not witness an identical transformation with water, but it is

¹⁷ Paddison, Laura. 2026. “There’s a Commodity Even More Vital than Oil and Gas in the Middle East - and It’s at Risk as War Heats Up.” CNN Climate. March 11, 2026. <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/03/11/climate/gulf-iran-war-water-desalination>.

increasingly evident that freshwater is acquiring strategic significance in ways that were difficult to imagine only a few decades ago.

The future challenge is unlikely to be a conventional “water war” fought solely for rivers or lakes. Instead, competition is more likely to emerge over the infrastructure, technologies and geographical advantages that determine access to freshwater. Dams, reservoirs, transboundary rivers, aquifers and even desalination capacity may become strategic assets as states seek to secure increasingly uncertain water supplies. In this sense, the politics of water could begin to resemble the politics of oil- not because the two resources are economically identical, but because both can influence national security, regional stability and the balance of power.

The question, therefore, is not whether water will inevitably replace oil as the world’s most contested resource; it is whether the international community can strengthen cooperation before freshwater scarcity becomes severe enough to redefine geopolitical priorities. If that effort falls short, the next great strategic competition may not be fought over the energy that powers nations, but over the water that sustains them.