

# **CHATAM HOUSE**

## **18 November 2019**

### **Opening Remarks**

#### **WATER AS A VEHICLE FOR PEACE**



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Our world is plagued by multiple crises in terms of energy, food, health, environment and many other. Each of these crises trigger tensions, either monetary, commercial, diplomatic, but in each case political.

The water crisis is too rarely emphasized, and the Royal Institute of International Affairs can take some credit for putting this topic on the agenda.

On behalf of the World Water Council, I would like to express our deep appreciation for this initiative, serving our global thinking.

Water is life - said in all languages.

Water is "Wou-ki", the "first indistinctness", said in early Buddhist texts.

In the Bible and in the Koran, the wells in the desert, the sources that they offer to nomads embody places of joy and wonder.

For these reasons, prayers are made for rain, and are worshipped in all religions. All literary texts conveying these messages celebrate water's magnificence.

Yes, water is life, but it is also death. Water as a public good, is a collective wealth. Mastering it today will bring considerable strength and power tomorrow.

So to reiterate your question, is water the new oil?

This is a real question, which is very hard to answer. Because there are numerous cases and multiple actors.

With no doubt, in a few decades, we will be able to deprive ourselves from oil because of promising alternative and renewable energies. But science does not tell us yet how man could deprive himself from water. And I don't believe that in the future water will unleash as much appetite as we can see for oil.

Indeed, when oil and gas trade generate considerable profits, this is not the case for water which does not have any quotations on stock markets.

Today, and even more tomorrow, water use will stand between, water human development, water for economy and water for nature, for biodiversity.

This will be even more true tomorrow, because water demand will increase on the long run, and because at global scale, water supply will be stagnating or will become scarcer.

Is it because of climate change? No, we shouldn't be making climate the scapegoat for all our mistakes.

Why? Because water availability is primarily linked to population growth, but also to rampant urbanization and rising living standards, all leading to increased consumption levels.

Little by little theories have flourished around the concept of "Water Security".

Indeed, securing the resource or, more precisely, water resources has become crucial since local, regional, and trans-boundary tensions keep arising.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Transboundary basins are today the heart of a new geopolitical order.

Forty to fifty percent of the world's population live across 250 transboundary river basins. The majority of these basins are fed by 280 aquifers, flowing across several countries. And yet, there is still no international law whose application is effective and collective.

There is a convention, adopted in 1997 by the United Nations on transboundary watercourses. But this convention just incentivizes the establishment of:

"mechanisms for a concerted and responsible management. "

This convention adopted in 1997 was only ratified 17 years later, in 2014, and signed by 35 countries which are not representative on the matter.

So, without a universal binding legal framework, how can we meet agreements and deal with international tensions and conflicts over water?

Water as a mobile resource is usually considered from different perspectives that face one another: those who give and those who receive.

Downstream countries use the principle of *absolute territorial integrity*, such as Egypt and Iraq, which indicates that downstream riparian countries have the right to receive the natural flow from upstream. In this way, upstream countries are expected to let the natural amount of water flow downstream.

On the other side, upstream countries like Ethiopia and China base their claims on the absolute territorial sovereignty principle so they may use the right to do whatever they want with the water running through their country regardless of its effects for neighbours.

In any case, water remains a national imprescriptible resource for any State.

We can see today that existing agreements are very limited, most often bilateral.

Successful examples exist, such as the Senegal River, the Rhine River and the Parana River, established through treaties and operated dedicated organizations where dialogue and sharing are the rule.

But fresh water is not the only subject here, but also irrigation, energy, navigation.

There are other more complex examples where tensions continue due to strong political sensitivities and permanent media pressure.

This is the case of the Nile River, where the construction of the Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia had triggered a major conflict with downstream States, such as Sudan and especially Egypt.

After being threatened of a military action, the time for dialogue came. Since the bilateral dialogue engaged between Ethiopia and Egypt didn't produce any results, Egypt asked for the assistance of a mediator. Russia proposed itself, but multilateral talks are now currently underway in Washington under the auspices of the United States.

The case of the Tigris and Euphrates is different. A first facilitation was initiated in 2006 by UNESCO and the World Water Council, which allowed four years later to significantly increase Turkish water allocations to Syria and Iraq.

In the past months, tensions have arisen following two years of droughts in Baghdad's region. And Iraq has, in the past days, has asked for the World Water Council's support.

Difficulties remain on the Mekong, on the Indus, the Niger, and between the United States and Mexico and in many other places in the world.

But there are no reasons today speaking water wars.

The dialogue, the full dialogue and nothing else dialogue is the only recommendation issued by our Council to deal with this type of situation.

You have to know that many of these tensions originate from wasted and poor water management. How can we justify that an American consumes on average between 700 and 900 liters of water per day when a European consumes about 200 liters?

Why keep on growing tomatoes or bananas in extremely arid countries?

Therefore, our Council works with its 60 states and four hundred member organizations to advise governments and local authorities, to use new resources and initiate behavioral changes.

This is why the World Water Council has taken the initiative in recent days to create an International Observatory for Alternative and Unconventional Water Resources.

We should stress the progress made by desalinization and especially by Reuse, all of those supported by solar, wind, marine and geothermal energies.

Let me also mention efforts made in reducing water consumption in a significant and sustainable way. In Egypt, a country facing ever-growing water shortages, the government has launched an ambitious plan to save water, by raising awareness of agricultural and urban populations to significantly reduce wastes of all kinds.

Each of these examples show the political nature of the required decisions for efficient water management.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Water is politics, but water management should not be politicized.

Hydropolitics necessarily entails the existence of hydrodiplomacy. It is not the property of diplomats. There is an everyday hydrodiplomacy in villages, the countryside, the cities, the megacities. For a well, a borehole, an irrigation canal.

This everyday diplomacy, as well as an hydrodiplomacy for large rivers and large dams that require conferences and international mediations.

One and the other are the same and are indispensable in order to avoid, considering your question, that water becomes a new oil.

Water should only be a vehicle for dialogue and peace between nations and men.