



**WATER AS THE GEOPOLITICAL WEAPON OF THE 21ST CENTURY:
RESOURCE GEOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL PRESSURES**

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Abstract: In the 21st century, water is no longer just a life-sustaining natural resource—it has become a strategic geopolitical tool. This article explores how freshwater scarcity and uneven geographical distribution of water resources have contributed to rising tensions, political leverage, and potential conflict. Focusing on critical transboundary river basins such as the Nile, Tigris–Euphrates, and Amu Darya–Syr Darya, the study investigates how states use water as a means of political pressure and control. The research concludes that sustainable water governance and regional cooperation are crucial to preventing water-related conflicts.

Keywords:

Water geopolitics, transboundary rivers, resource geography, hydro-politics, water conflict, political pressure, Central Asia

Water has emerged as a key element in international relations and regional power dynamics in the 21st century. As global water demand continues to rise due to population growth, industrialization, and climate change, water-scarce regions increasingly face not only environmental but also **political and security challenges**.

Unlike oil or gas, freshwater has no substitute, and its geographic distribution is highly uneven. This creates imbalances in access and control, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions. Countries located upstream of transboundary rivers often possess strategic advantage over downstream neighbors, giving rise to **hydro-political tension**.

This paper analyzes the geopolitical role of water in international relations, the geography of water-rich and water-scarce regions, and how water scarcity is used as a political tool in selected regions.

The study employs a qualitative and comparative approach, relying on:

- **Case studies** of transboundary river systems: Nile (Africa), Tigris–Euphrates (Middle East), Amu Darya and Syr Darya (Central Asia);
- **Geographical data analysis** of water availability per capita and rainfall distribution from FAO AQUASTAT and World Bank databases;





• **Policy document analysis** including treaties, agreements, and international disputes;

• **Scholarly literature review** on hydro-politics, resource conflicts, and environmental security.

Geographical Distribution of Freshwater Resources

Region	Annual Renewable Water (m ³ /capita)	Water Stress Level
Sub-Saharan Africa	3,200	Medium
Middle East	900	Extreme
Central Asia	1,800	High
South Asia	1,100	High

Key Geopolitical Flashpoints

• **Nile River Basin:** Egypt depends on upstream countries (mainly Ethiopia and Sudan) for over 90% of its freshwater. The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has led to diplomatic and military threats.

• **Tigris–Euphrates Basin:** Turkey, controlling headwaters, has built several dams under the GAP project, reducing water flow to Iraq and Syria, exacerbating regional instability.

• **Amu Darya and Syr Darya Basins:** In Central Asia, upstream countries (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) prioritize hydropower, while downstream nations (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan) rely on water for irrigation. This mismatch creates political tension, especially in dry seasons.

Water as Political Leverage

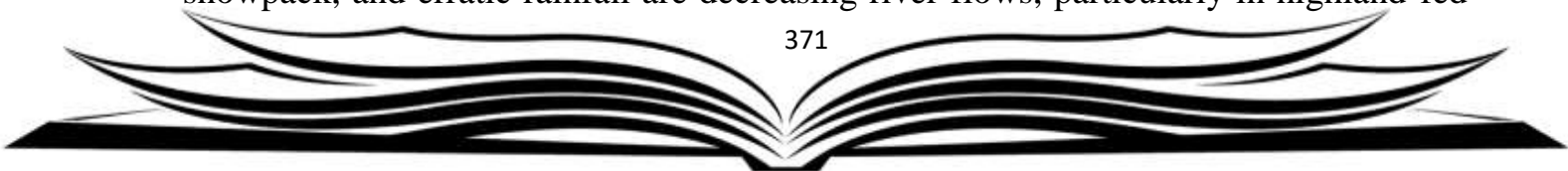
• Upstream states **control seasonal flows** to exert pressure on downstream neighbors;

• Water allocation is often tied to **energy or trade negotiations**;

• Some countries use **water security rhetoric** to justify military infrastructure or cross-border surveillance.

Water scarcity is not merely an environmental concern but a matter of national security and regional stability. The asymmetry in river geography gives upstream countries significant leverage, transforming water into a **geopolitical instrument**.

Climate change is further intensifying this issue. Glacial retreat, reduced snowpack, and erratic rainfall are decreasing river flows, particularly in highland-fed





basins like the Amu Darya. In politically fragmented regions, this raises the risk of **resource conflicts**.

Moreover, many existing water-sharing treaties are either outdated or lack enforcement mechanisms. The absence of **binding international frameworks** allows stronger states to dominate negotiations, marginalizing weaker downstream actors.

On the other hand, regions like the Rhine Basin in Europe demonstrate that **cooperative water governance** is possible when built on mutual trust, data sharing, and inclusive institutions.

Water is becoming one of the most strategic resources of the 21st century. As access becomes more contested, its role as a **tool of geopolitical influence and conflict** grows. Addressing water-related challenges requires:

- **Strengthening transboundary water governance** through updated and enforceable agreements;
- **Investing in water efficiency and reuse technologies** to reduce dependence;
- **Enhancing regional cooperation mechanisms** and trust-building measures;
- Incorporating **climate change adaptation strategies** into water policy.

Only through multilateral collaboration and sustainable water management can the potential for water to become a weapon be transformed into a driver of peace and regional stability.

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