

BOOK REVIEWS

Transboundary Water Politics in the Developing World, by Naho Mirumachi, Abingdon, UK, Routledge, 2015, 202 pp. (online), ISBN 9781135082826.

‘Water wars’ are a hot topic and are often referred to in the media, especially during extreme weather events, such as droughts. For example in 2014, the *Guardian* proclaimed “Water wars: a new reality” and Al-Jazeera warned that the “risk of water wars” was on the rise.

While the seemingly impending water wars grab the reader’s attention, much less attention is given to water cooperation. The UN International Year of Water Cooperation in 2013 tried to raise awareness of the world’s 276 internationally shared river basins, many of which are managed through multilateral agreements between their riparian states.

In her book *Transboundary Water Politics in the Developing World* Naho Mirumachi successfully links the two topics – water conflict and water cooperation – and critically uncovers political power dynamics hidden behind each concept. The book makes an original contribution by questioning the fixation on conflict and introducing a new framework for analysis of what Mirumachi calls the Transboundary Waters Interaction NexuS (TWINS).

The book examines the politics in which the use, management and governance of shared water resources are embedded. For Mirumachi, “water acts as a medium through which politics occur” (5). Here socio-political processes determine the approach taken by riparian countries to solve water scarcity and other environmental issues. According to the author, the physical realities in a river basin are secondary when it comes to how actors address tensions over water, either through cooperative solutions or through conflicting tensions.

The book is structured with a theoretical part (Chapters 1–3) and an empirical part (Chapters 4–7). The first two chapters develop the main arguments of the book and present the key concepts on which the arguments are based. To gain understanding of interactions over transboundary waters, the author examines speech acts by the “hydrocracy”. A hydrocracy is a group of elite decision makers who play a role in shaping river basin management. This group is characterized by “its preference for engineered solutions for controlling nature based on a belief in scientific and technological progress” (8). The analysis aims to unravel the factors constituting the political power of different hydrocracies in each of the riparian states in a river basin. For this purpose Mirumachi uses the framework of hydro-hegemony (Zeitoun and Warner, 2006) to explain asymmetric relationships between basin states, which are based on three factors: riparian position, hard and soft power, and capacity to physically capture water.

Chapter 3 comprises the core of the book by introducing the TWINS framework. TWINS is based on the idea that conflict and cooperation coexist. The framework applies a matrix with four levels of intensity for conflict and four for cooperation. Thus, interactions between riparian states can be situated on the matrix combining varying degrees of cooperation *and* conflict. The framework is compelling as it advances beyond commonly used frameworks, which situate conflict and cooperation as polar opposites on a continuous scale. Instead of interpreting diplomatic relations between countries as either cooperative *or* conflictive, TWINS makes a nuanced, critical analysis of transboundary interactions possible. By recognizing the possibility that conflict and cooperation exist side by side, the framework does not shy away from the messiness of ‘wicked problems’, such as the governance of shared water resources.

The book applies the TWINS matrix to three empirical case studies of transboundary water interactions: the Ganges River basin, the Orange-Senqu River basin and the Mekong River basin (Chapters 4–6). The comparative case study approach underpins Mirumachi's theoretical framework through empirical evidence. The analysis successfully demonstrates how water becomes an instrument through which political issues manifest themselves.

The empirical part starts with the Ganges River basin, focusing on the relationship between India and Nepal. This case study is an example of a cooperative bilateral relationship outside a formalized river basin commission. Mirumachi finds that despite the hardly varying cooperative nature of the relations between the two riparian states, cooperation in this case is rather shallow and thus hinders constructive renegotiations over water allocation.

Chapter 5 looks more closely at a water transfer project between South Africa and Lesotho in the Orange-Senqu River basin. Despite a joint commission governing the project, the degree of conflict and cooperation between the two countries varies significantly over time. The analysis reveals that geopolitical considerations as well as domestic interests strongly shape relations over the shared waters between the two countries. Though there are other regional multilateral cooperation initiatives, which could mitigate hydro-hegemonic behaviour, the examination through TWINS shows that these are ineffectively countering national interests and hydro-hegemonic control.

On the example of the Mekong River basin, the last empirical chapter explores how transboundary water interactions manifest themselves through a multilateral river basin organization. The analysis is focused on the interactions between Thailand and Vietnam, two riparian countries with a strong upstream–downstream dynamic. The case study demonstrates the importance of regional and domestic political economies to explain interactions over shared water. For the two Mekong riparians the development of hydropower and thus damming of the river is a key interest. The chapter provides evidence for the relevance of water management discourses to other sectors (in this case the energy sector) and national interests.

In conclusion, Mirumachi's book presents a compelling analysis of how the power of hydrocracies across three different river basins shapes transboundary water interactions, resulting in changing levels of conflict and cooperation. The TWINS framework is an advance in the study of international relations and water politics, and could also be applied to other transboundary and politicized issues. One slight shortcoming of the book is its focus on state governments as actors on the international policy level. While these are undeniably important in shaping water resources management, especially at the more local scale where water management interventions are implemented, other actors such as local government, community organizations, private companies and NGOs play crucial roles. Therefore, one interesting future research project would be to apply the TWINS matrix to multiple policy scales, and see how the framework performs in a different context.

Reference

Zeitoun, M. & Warner, J. (2006). Hydro-hegemony: a framework for analysis of trans-boundary water conflicts. *Water Policy*, 8, (5), 435–460.

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