



**International Roundtable on Water Cooperation for Peace and Security**

**House of Lords, London  
24 October 2016**

*Co-hosted by*

Strategic Foresight Group

Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflicts at Harris Manchester College,  
Oxford University



*A group of 30 leading practitioners and scholars in trans-boundary water relations met at the House of Lords, London, on 24 October 2016 for exchange of insights. The meeting was convened by Strategic Foresight Group and the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflicts at Harris Manchester College, Oxford University. The free flowing nature of conversation helped connect dots in the water diplomacy sphere. It provided answers to some questions while raising new ones.*

### **Is water a basin security issue or a global security issue?**

It is obvious that water is a regional security issue in shared river basins. Actions in one country can have implications for other countries, causing tensions and conflicts. The conversation in London clarified that water, acting in conjunction with other drivers of change, can also affect global peace and security. The Russian drought in 2010, resulting in ban on grains exports, increased bread prices in North Africa and combined with local breakdown of trust in the institutions of state contributed to the Arab Spring revolutions. The drought in Syria also compounded the collapse of social contract between the state and the civil society, forcing farmers to move to over-stretched cities, generating flow of refugees to the neighbouring countries and Europe. The refugee pressure in Europe changed the political dynamics in the European Union giving rise to the right wing political forces. Similarly, the floods in Pakistan in 2010 strengthened extremist organisations which eventually worsened the security environment in South Asia. If there had been cooperation between countries sharing rivers on floods, drought and ecosystem management, it might have been possible to adapt to crisis and mitigate the impact.

Currently, less than 20 per cent of the cropped land is cultivated. It provides 40 per cent of food. In some countries less than 10 per cent of the cropped land is cultivated. There are demands for increasing irrigation to alleviate poverty. If large irrigation plans are put in place, leading to diversion of water resources, there will be conflicts between riparian countries. Alternatively, water supplies will not be able to meet the growing demand for food production. Moreover, with desertification and the depletion of water resources, if some countries enter international market for food grains and place orders for 100-200 million tonnes of additional grains, food prices will mount, causing pain for poor people in all parts of the world. This is bound to result in riots and conflicts. The drop in food production may be in one geography, but its impact can be worldwide through international market mechanism.

Water is thus an issue for peace and security in some of the basins as much as it is a global security issue, in conjunction with other factors. It is expected that this growing realisation will be reflected in the Budapest Water Summit Declaration (November 2016) and the report of the Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace (September 2017).

### **When exactly does water become a source of conflict?**

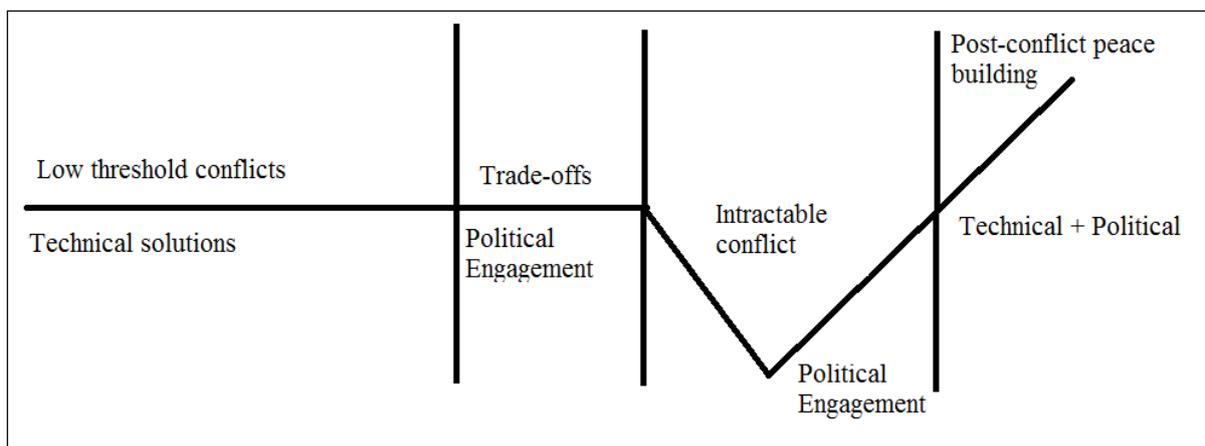
It is possible to have routine management of a shared river basin in a cooperative way so long as there is an institutional mechanism to deal with it. It's when large scale infrastructure – particularly for hydro-electricity or irrigation – is planned that cooperation can give way to conflict. This applies to creation of new infrastructure as well as repair and renewal of aging infrastructure. Experts look for early warning signs by monitoring tender documents in sensitive basins, which can potentially provide scope for negotiations and settlement. Such negotiated settlements are plausible in societies making rational choices. However, in societies facing existential risks, there is a risk of water relations being portrayed in the context of insecurity paradigm of the country.

The conversation in London therefore suggested that maximum effort should be made to resolve differences over large infrastructure or other issues at a low threshold level and before water

contributes to breakdown of the state and the society. Once the dangerous threshold between a society operating on rational choices and the one facing existential risks is crossed, water needs to be part of a larger package of conflict resolution.

**Can we define the continuum of the relationship between water, peace and security?**

Cooperation and small conflicts between most riparian countries in shared basins can be mostly managed with technical cooperation tools. At this stage, there is no particular need for engagement of political leaders. When the conflict, existing or potential, increases in intensity because of the stakes involved, it is necessary to design trade-offs between water and other public goods such as public investments and regional security. At this stage it is necessary to involve political leaders at the highest level – Heads of Governments – since only they can determine terms of trade-offs between different ministries in negotiations with foreign countries. Once a water conflict is enmeshed with other factors, it is extremely difficult to resolve it. At this stage high political leaders may not want to get involved or may adopt a defensive approach. When the conflict reaches a violent stalemate and parties look for solution, water needs to be part of a larger package. At this stage, Heads of Government must be involved. Once the conflict is over, water needs to be included in the post-conflict peace-building efforts where solutions are technical but guided by political leaders.



The first 3 phases of this continuum can be represented in concentric circles conceptualised by one of the participants.

**Can upstream become downstream?**

The conversation in London emphasised that good governance, efficiency and new technologies are not only tools for integrated water resources management but also possible solutions to conflicts between neighbouring countries by reducing demand-supply gap. It is known how Singapore used good governance and technology to reduce its dependence on Malaysia, from where it imports water, and averted a potential conflict. Technological solutions may include desalination, waste water treatment, solar energy, and precision irrigation, among others. In particular, the falling cost of desalination can bring about a paradigm shift. As desalination is best done near the coasts, it is possible to imagine that coasts will become upstream with water flowing by pipelines to the hinterland which will in effect become the new downstream. This can change power equations as it can be already observed in some parts of the world. Such a phenomenon would obviously be restricted to the countries with access to coastline and energy. Nevertheless, it needs to be taken into account.

## **But what actually is water?**

Much of the discourse on water and peace is about fresh water, primarily rivers and lakes. The conversation in London strongly suggested that groundwater should also be factored while shaping future trans-boundary relations. Groundwater accounts for 30 per cent of the earth's fresh water resources whereas lakes, rivers and reservoirs account for 0.4 per cent of the earth's fresh water resources. In many parts of the world groundwater tables are already dropping and in some places groundwater is contaminated by arsenic or other hazardous substances. Yet the sheer volume of groundwater, in comparison with the volume of water in lakes and rivers, makes it essential to factor it in the future management of water resources as groundwater can be a cause or remedy for conflicts in some parts of the world.

## **Can water cooperation contribute to comprehensive peace?**

It is possible to construct an approach to find solutions to water related conflicts using tools that may be applicable to each point in the continuum. It is more interesting to explore how water can be an entry point for dialogue for broader peace. In the reconstruction of relationships in the Balkans, Sava River Agreement played a key role in building confidence. The Foyle Fisheries Commission was one of the inspirations for the Northern Ireland peace process. Water Cooperation Quotient published by Strategic Foresight Group (2015) revealed an unusual equation: Any two countries engaged in active water cooperation do not go to war for any reason whatsoever.

## **And where do we go now?**

The conversation in London was very useful as an exercise in exchange of insights. It connected dots between basin and global security issues, between technical and political solutions, between peace efforts to resolve water disputes and water cooperation to build comprehensive peace.

The insights exchanged in conversation, and captured in this brief report, can inform efforts to use water for peace and peace for water, such as the discussions in the UN Security Council, various water summits and the work of the Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace.

The input was very valuable for the Strategic Foresight Group to sharpen and finalise its Water Cooperation Quotient, which in its new form will help countries answer a challenging question: How can the countries sharing water resources advance their cooperation in a way that will contribute to comprehensive peace and security in their region?

The convening helped foster a network of practitioners and experts who will be regularly kept informed of the peace and security dimension of the international water discourse.

In the ultimate analysis, conversations of this nature are helpful if they make even small contribution to improving the life of 2 billion poor people living in shared river basins of the developing world. Can their living conditions improve? Can wars be averted? Can resources wasted on instruments of destruction be diverted to solutions that improve life? Can water be transformed from a source of potential crisis into an instrument of peace and cooperation?

*(This report reflects understanding of the proceedings of the roundtable by the host organisations. It is not a consensus statement and cannot be said to represent the consent of the participants.)*

## **List of Participants**

1. The Right Hon Lord Alderdice, former Speaker of the Northern Ireland Parliament and Director of the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflicts at Harris Manchester College, Oxford University (co-host)
2. Dr Sundeep Waslekar, President, Strategic Foresight Group (co-host)
3. H E Danilo Turk, former President of Slovenia, Chairman of Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace
4. H E Kabine Komara, former Prime Minister of Guinea, High Commissioner of the Senegal River Basin Commission
5. Minister Pär Stenbäck, former Foreign Minister of Finland
6. Dr Joakim Harlin, Vice-Chair of UN-Water and Chief of Freshwater Ecosystems Unit at UNEP
7. Dr Uri Shani, former Water Commissioner of Israel
8. Dr Ephraim Sneh, former Health Minister and Deputy Defence Minister of Israel
9. Dr Dogan Altinbilek, Vice Chairman of World Water Council, Turkey
10. Dr Aaron Salzberg , Special Coordinator for Water Resources, State Department, USA
11. Dr Alexander Sokolov, Director of International Scientific and Educational Foresight Centre at the Higher School of Economics, National Research University, Russia
12. Prof. Andras Szöllösi-Nagy, Research Director, Institute for Advanced Studies, Hungary
13. Dr Fritz Holzwarth, Rector of UNESCO-IHE, Delft, Netherlands
14. Mr Edward Mortimer, Distinguished Fellow, All Souls College, Oxford University, UK
15. Dr David Grey, Professor of Environmental Studies at Oxford University, UK
16. Dr Aaron Wolf, Professor of Geography at College of Earth, Ocean, and Atmospheric Sciences, Oregon State University, USA
17. Dr John Nyaoro, Executive Director of Nile Basin Initiative, Uganda
18. Dr Thomas Axworthy, Secretary General, InterAction Council, Canada
19. Mr Robert Sandford, Senior Advisor on Water Issues, InterAction Council, Canada
20. Dr Mark Smith, Director of Global Water Programme, International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Switzerland

21. Mr Jean-Louis Oliver, Secretary General, French Water Academy
22. Dr Alexander Verbeek, Senior Advisor, Stockholm Environment Institute (on sabbatical from the Netherlands Ministry for Foreign Affairs)
23. Mr Jean-Paul Penrose, Senior Adviser, Climate & Environment Department, Department for International Development, Government of UK
24. Mr Johan Gely, Head of Global Water Initiatives, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Switzerland
25. Dr. Susanne Schmeier, Coordinator, Trans-boundary Water Management, Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) , Germany
26. Sir David Richmond, Chief Executive, Brazzaville Foundation for Peace and Conservation, London
27. Dr Gareth Price, Senior Research Fellow, Asia Programme, Chatham House, London
28. Dr Daanish Mustafa, Department of Geography , King's College London, UK
29. Ms Ilmas Futehally, Executive Director, Strategic Foresight Group
30. Ms Anumita Raj, Senior Programme Manager, Strategic Foresight Group
31. Ms Diana Philip, Senior Research Manager, Strategic Foresight Group