

# New war fronts lie in water zones

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**B.** Strengthen and encourage transboundary river sharing mechanism to avoid inter-state conflicts.

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## The Essay:

“If the wars of the last century were fought over oil, the wars of the next century would be fought over water, unless we change our approach to manage this precious and vital resource”, cautioned former Vice President of the World Bank, **Ismael Giragorin** in 1995. The statement holds ground today as the world has moved beyond the land battlefields and has delved into the depth of oceans, seas, and has seized water resources to maintain strategic depth over its rivals in the ever changing geopolitical sphere. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is not an exaggeration to say that new frontiers lie in the water zones as sea trade routes are increasingly becoming militarized, competition over tapping undersea resources is driving tensions, and critical infrastructure is becoming a strategic target installed in oceans is becoming an strategic target. Moreover, oceans are getting transformed into grounds for grey-zone warfare while climate change is opening new maritime frontiers. Additionally, conventional military

stands off are being exploited to sabotage water transboundary water treaties while increasing water scarcity is fueling regional conflict. Similarly, water inequalities within states are exacerbating sub-national conflicts while dependence on agriculture and trade has made agriculture water national security one. Water insecurity in metropolitan is igniting unrest while strategic zones are being used by insurgent groups to advance their agendas. However, solution to global maritime and regional water conflicts lies in enhancing the role of UN, strengthening transboundary river sharing mechanisms and enforcing climate commitment goals for sustainable water availability. In fact, water zones have emerged out from oceans to rivers have emerged as new war fronts in the today's world.

Throughout the human history, man has been fighting battles and wars on ground to capture resources and territories and the civilizations spread across continents remained disconnected from each other by unfathomable oceans. But as the humans acquired knowledge and resources, they decided to discover new

lands by settling themselves on sea voyages. In this pursuit, nations started to capture far off regions under colonialization (militarily) and the drive spread to Americas, Africa, South Asia, not through air travel (as it was not available then) but sea routes. However, the main target of the era imperial powers was ~~not~~ sea but large swathes of land, inhabited by humans and blessed with rich resources. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, water is being called as "blue gold" as coal and oil used to be called as "black gold". This vast resource, which covers around 70% of the Earth's surface, has become modern battleground as it for and of it, only 3% freshwater, has become modern battleground for major <sup>and</sup> global, regional land powers.

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To begin with, global sea trade routes are becoming increasingly ~~becoming~~ militarized as global powers compete to protect supply-chains and maintain dominance. Today, oceans are no longer passive trade routes but arenas of strategic competition,

power and control. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 80% of global trade by volume and

70% of global trade by value is transported by sea, making maritime zones central to modern geopolitics.

In this context, the United States and China, the two global rival powers, have been increasingly concentrating naval deployments in the ~~South China Sea~~ and

~~Indian Ocean~~, not only to protect their own trade interests but also to maintain strategic control.

This shows that the new war fronts lie in water zones as global powers flex their military muscles over international trade routes.

Moreover, global competition to tap undersed minerals and offshore hydrocarbons risks military escalation. As these resources remain critical for advancing technology and fossil fuel supplies, oceans are emerging as contested frontiers. According to a study, ~~South China Sea~~ contains substantial reserves of around ~~11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic meter of natural gas.~~

However, the region remains marred by interstate

conflicts involving China, Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei. The exploration threatens regional peace and security as multiple claimants can draw daggers at each other. "Resource extraction can transforms maritime disputes into zero-sum strategic contexts." ~ Chatham House. Hence, water front zones, though blessed with rich resources, can become war fronts as nations rally to extract them.

Similarly, under critical undersea infrastructure has become a strategic target of in the modern warfare. ~~According~~ The invisible infrastructure including internet cables and pipelines are critical to global connectivity and are susceptible to sabotage. According to NATO, around 95% of global data traffic moves through undersea internet cables while and facilitates over 10 Trillion dollars in daily financial transactions.

In WWI, Britain deliberately cut Germany's telegraph lines to render it disconnected in global communication.

Most recently, in 2022, undersea Nord Stream pipelines stretching between Russia and Germany were subjected

to sabotage in a series of explosions, moving **NATO** to launch **Baltic Sentry** to protect underwater infrastructure. This shows that undersea infrastructure has become "soft underbelly of modern power", and also a silent but critical war front.

Furthermore, oceans are rapidly becoming grounds for grey-zone warfare. Global and regional powers are actively using waters for hostile actions while remaining cautiously below the thresholds of traditional armed warfare.

The **UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR)** describes maritime domain as a "laboratory for grey-zone warfare." The naval and airforce exercise launched by China in December 2025 under 'Mission Justice 2025' around Taiwan to emphasize its territorial integrity over the island state <sup>reveals</sup> shows the grey-zone warfare tactics. Hence, it substantiates that new warfronts lie in water zone in the form of grey-zone warfare.

Additionally, the rapid ice melt induced by climate change and global warming is opening new trade and maritime routes in the Arctic. Since ice age, the region had been frozen but the global warming is creating new routes in the Arctic region and would move global powers to accelerate militarization and seize strategic control. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Arctic region is losing ice cover by 12% per decade and opening new sea lanes and resource zones. Just as the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 reshaped global geopolitics, the opening of new sea routes would also have a significant impact.

A report published by Arctic Council and IPCC feared that this would trigger military deployment by Arctic and non-Arctic powers in the region. Thus, climate change and global warming are exacerbating the conflicts on water zones as major powers eye emerging sea routes.

In addition, conventional military standoffs between states are being used to sabotage and violate water sharing treaties.

In order to renege on the mutually signed and ratified treaties, upper riparian states have made a conventional conflict as present to deprive lower riparian states of their due share in river waters.

This new dynamic of water reorganization emerged in April 2025 when India unilaterally suspended landmark **Indus Water Treaty (1960)**, signed with Pakistan, in April 2025 that during the latter of alleged cross-border terrorism. In response, Pakistan termed the Indian action "an act of war." This illustrates that how Water, even transboundary rivers, are becoming a new war front between states which are historically locked in geopolitical rivalry.

Moreover, the climate change induced water scarcity and reduction in river flows are breeding regional mistrust and tensions. States dependent on transboundary rivers are increasingly raising concerns over reduced river flows and development of water reservoirs by upper riparian states. For instance, UN Secretary General **Antonio Guterres** noted that "Water stress is becoming one of

defining challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> CE, with profound impacts for peace and security." For instance, the world's longest river, Nile, is becoming a source of contention between 11 countries amid reduced flows and development of hydro power projects. Countries including Egypt and Sudan have belled alarms over the construction of Grand Renaissance Dam by Ethiopia, by taking leverage of being an upper riparian state. This reflects that climate change led alterations in river flows and construction of mega hydro power projects makes water a new war front which can escalate into a whole region.

Likewise, water inequalities within states are fueling sub-national unrest and conflicts. Provinces and states within countries do not see eye to eye with each other and the lower riparians accuse the upper riparians of misappropriating their water shares. "Water can be a source of cooperation or conflict; how it is managed determines which" (UN World Bank).

For example, India, the country of over 1.4 billion people, regularly faces inter-state tensions over

The distribution of water resources, often spiralling into social unrests. Similarly, Pakistan also suffers with water disputes between **Punjab and Sindh**, with both states provinces accusing each other of withdrawing more water than allowed. This pattern of intra state water rivalries exhibits that war fronts over water not ~~or~~ do not exist in oceans but only but also deep within states.

Additionally, ~~increasing reliance~~ of agriculture ~~on water~~ has led the nations to regard the latter as a ~~national~~ ~~security~~ asset. In Food security remains one of the top national priorities of ~~any~~ country and water serves as a vital resource to achieve this objective. According to **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)**, "Without reliable water, food security is impossible." For instance, countries like **Pakistan** meet their ~~80% of~~ demand for agriculture from shared river basins and halting its flows by an upper riparian state would ~~not only~~ undermine its food security but ~~also~~ could also trigger a regional armed

conflict. This reveals that how deep water interests are embedded in a country's national security interests and contains potential to open a warfront.

Furthermore, increasing water stress in metropolitan cities fuels civil unrest and political instability. Amid rising population growth and booming urbanization, big cities are facing dire water scarcity which often escalate in unrest. "The want of the future may not begin over ideology or borders—but over taps running dry in cities," (World Economic Forum, Global Risks Report 2025).

For example, in Iran, water protests in Isfahan expanded into wider anti-government demonstrations in 2021. Similarly, Karachi, the largest urban center in Pakistan faces a daily shortage of around 650 million gallons out of 1,200 million gallon demand and shortages exacerbate Sindhi-Muhajir-Pashtun tensions. Thus, it displays that water stress in metropolitan cities is actively transforming into a warfront like situation, triggering unrest, political instability and internal security crises.

In addition, water zones such as rivers, deltas, lakes and mangroves are increasingly being used by irregular forces, insurgent groups and criminal networks as operational bases. In countries marred by governance failures and loose state control, these areas provide a buffer zone to non-state actors to carry out illegal operations. **UN Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC)** noted in 2014 that coastal and riverine regions are among the least governed spaces in developing countries. For instance, **ISIS** used river valley for logistics and weapons transport and exercised control over **Tal Afar** and **Mosul** dams to exert coercion. This shows that loose state control in developing nations provide loopholes to non-state actors in effectively converting water zones into war fronts, undermining internal and regional security.

In the light of the above arguments, it is evident that water zones have become new warfronts globally. However, there are some suggested measures to overcome these issues which pose a threat to global, regional and

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national security.

First of all, there is a dire need to enhance the role of the **UN Convention on the Law of Sea** and strengthen its enforcement powers. The convention, signed by 168 countries, governs around international waters, making it one of the most widely accepted international legal regimes. However, without enforcement powers, the convention remains toothless as it a tribunal ruled against China's expansionist claims in the **South China Sea Arbitration** in 2016 but failed to enforce the decision. Thus it is imperative that such international legal regimes are largely supported and be provided enforcement powers to uphold a just and peaceful governance of international waters.

Secondly, the time cannot be more ripe to strengthen and encourage transboundary river sharing mechanism in order to ensure equitable and non-coercive water governance between states. In this regard, **UN Convention on Watercourses (1997)**

should be ratified by all countries which share river basins. Disappointingly, the Convention is ratified by only 40 states, those too which do not have major water sharing problem. Moreover, it is pertinent to further fortify the **Vienna Convention on Treaties** as the ~~illegal~~ unilateral suspension of the **Indus Water Treaty (1960)** by India sets a wrong and shameful precedent for the future of other international treaties on water sharing. Strengthening these conventions would help trust building and peaceful resolution of interstate water disputes, preventing new war fronts.

Last but not the least, it is inevitable for the global community to enforce strict climate change policies and to ensure a sustainable availability of clean water. In this regard, it is imperative to uphold the **Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015)** in order to keep the global warming below the  $1.5^{\circ}\text{C}$  benchmark. This would ensure that global warming does not accelerate water crisis, beside other environmental woes.

Similarly, **SDG 6** provided by the **UN**, which aims to ensure

clean water and sanitation for all by 2030 demands enthusiastic action by all states. This would not only ensure access to clean water but also boost human development by creating new war fronts that have very much entrenched in water zones.

“Safe water is not a privilege but a basic human right.”

(UNICEF)

In the light of all the above made discussion, it may be concluded that water zones stretching from oceans, rivers and cities have become new war fronts. Conflicts arise as trade routes face militarization, states compete to tap underwater resources, and underwater installations face sabotage threats. Moreover, water zones are becoming theatres for grey zone warfare, global warming opening new maritime lanes, and In addition, water agreements are being scrapped over military conflicts, interstate water sharing suffering mistrust, and inequalities arising inter-provincial conflicts. Similarly, agriculture as national food security need has made water a national security asset while water shortages in urban centers have spiked civil unrest, and

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weak governance has made water zones ~~vulnerable to~~ <sup>tr to write in better grammar</sup> insurgents within states. However, solution to the spiralling water-borne conflict lies in empowering UNCOLS, implementing climate agreements and strengthening and promoting <sup>transboundary</sup> water sharing mechanism between states. Hence, it is hoped that sanity will prevail among the global powers for joining hands over for cooperation of over shared human asset over and to avoid conflict in the greater interest of humanity. "History shows that nations are more likely to cooperate over water than to fight over it." — Aaron Wolf.

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