

Water as an Instrument of Peace

By **DANILO TÜRK**

FOR a number of years the problems of water have been placed high on the lists of global risks. The basic picture is frighteningly familiar: Today, about two billion people lack access to safe drinking water and most of them live in impoverished, often violent regions of the world. Experts agree that by mid-century, close to four billion people – about 40 percent of the world’s population – will live in water stressed basins. This number is likely to grow when the projected effects of climate change lead to diminished crop yields, while triggering floods and other weather extremes causing further deterioration of water quality. This will surely exacerbate the situation of food security as well as increase displacement of vulnerable groups of people. The ingredients for violent conflict are all there.

As seen in some of the contemporary armed conflicts, water resources and infrastructure often become objects of deliberate armed attack or a weapon of war. The experience of armed conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and, earlier, Somalia and Darfur all brought great suffering to civilian populations deprived of water in war.

Water has to be protected in wars and water projects have to be part of the path to peace. Stable peace in Syria will have to include water management arrangements for the Euphrates as well as a vision of water cooperation for the Mesopotamian region as a whole. Is such a development conceivable? It should be. Peace agreements of the past, from the peace of Westphalia in 1648 to the post-conflict peace building



On October 11, 2018, Chinese Ambassador to Thailand Lü Jian, and Wijam Simachaya, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of Thailand, sign the MOU on Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Special Fund Projects in Bangkok.

in the Balkans two decades ago, have time and again confirmed the importance of water cooperation for the sustainability of peace.

It is in the time of peace when more must be done to address this issue. Water is a shared resource. States sharing rivers, lakes, and underground aquifers have every reason to cooperate. However, international water cooperation has not progressed sufficiently. There are 286 shared water basins in the world, involving 146 states, but only 84 among these basins have joint water management bodies. The situation of underground aquifers is even more worrisome. There are less than 10 agreements on the trans-boundary cooperation relating to aquifers today. Clearly, much needs to be done in the future.

Looking at the existing peaceful trans-boundary water cooperation one can clearly see the advantages of many of the existing models in every region of the world. In Africa, cooperation on the Senegal River, involving Guinea, Senegal, Mali, and Mauritania, has in the four decades of its existence proved beneficial to all four participating countries and has given rise to some of the most sophisticated forms of cooperation and financing of joint water projects. In Europe, the experience gained on the rivers Rhine, Danube, and their tributaries for almost two centuries represents an important element of peaceful cooperation. In the Americas there are many successful trans-boundary water arrangements – both in the North and Central America as well on the Southern Cone. In Asia, the Indus Waters Treaty has been a welcome success in the otherwise strained relations between India and Pakistan. Meanwhile the Lancang-Mekong cooperation has helped the countries of South East Asia while the more recent involvement of China offers new opportunities for expanding benefits for the people of the riparian countries in agriculture, energy generation, environmental protection, and, most fundamentally, eradication of poverty.

Based on such experience it is possible to identify global tasks for the future trans-boundary water cooperation and support of the United Nations and other global, as well as regional organizations. Much more can and should be done for effective monitoring of the quantities and quality of trans-boundary water. Sharing of data represents a major part of trans-boundary water cooperation. Using this information for wise and cooperative policy making at the national level and internationally is another way to cooperate.

Trans-boundary water cooperation is a matter of governance, and most of governance is concentrated at the national and local levels. Therefore, careful balance has to be found between the globally identifiable needs and locally achievable levels of governance. Governance means coordination – within the riparian states and among them. Decisions in these matters are essentially made within states. However, good practices do exist in different parts of the world and they include trans-boundary water cooperation. They have to be studied and taken advantage of in national policy making and as an inspiration for new trans-boundary water arrangements.

There is also the fundamental question of finance. Special attention must be paid to financing of the prep-

aration of the trans-boundary water projects and joint investment plans for building of trans-boundary water infrastructure. Good preparation means half the battle won. This applies to timely removal of risks and clarification of issues that need to be resolved in order for the financial institutions to take the key financial decisions. This is the way to expand the “safe space” for the preparation of projects in the water sector and, importantly, for making such projects bankable.

Finance, obviously, means money. But equally important is the aspect of water diplomacy. A major task of water diplomacy is to create safe spaces for sound financial decisions. At the same time water diplomacy should catalyze the understanding of the political importance of water cooperation. Political leaders would benefit from advice that makes their decisions to engage in trans-boundary water cooperation easier. This is an important element of water diplomacy and peace.

Peace in our time requires much more than mere absence of war among states. Peace today requires timely understanding of the coming problems that could create a variety of future threats. It requires a set of sophisticated tools for global security cooperation in the widest meaning of the word. Trans-boundary water cooperation is one of them. There is no time to waste. The international community has to pool their strength and act.

But action requires leadership. China is in a good position to exercise leadership. Not only has China become the second largest economy in the world, it is already among the most important players in the field of trans-boundary water cooperation. China is a source of several rivers supplying South and South-East Asia with water. Important experience already exists in trans-boundary water cooperation. The earlier mentioned Lancang-Mekong cooperation is the most visible among them. And there is Central Asia, a region of great developmental needs and potential where trans-boundary water cooperation has to be developed much further from current levels. China’s Belt and Road Initiative and its financial and technical potential represent a great opportunity for the future. The world will be eager to see the contribution of China in the years to come. ■

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