



HYDROPOLITICS: THE GLOBAL CONTEXT ГИДРОПОЛИТИКА: ГЛОБАЛЬНЫЙ КОНТЕКСТ

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From Geopolitics to Hydropolitics: In Search of the Discipline Boundaries

Alexey V. Mikhalev 

Banzarov Buryat State University, Ulan Ude, Russian Federation

✉ mihalew80@mail.ru

Abstract. Hydropolitics is a term that has spread widely in the 21st century. Its definitions are multiple and often ambiguous. The breadth and contradictory nature of the concept is the reason for the researchers' increased attention to it since it forms a demand for certainty. The article aims to analyze the definitions and disciplinary claims of hydropolitics. Methodologically, the author draws on the ideas of formal geopolitics which makes it possible to consider the problems of water supply and political power in the context of the increasing scarcity of natural resources. Endowing water with political meanings and using it as a symbol is, in fact, a centuries-old practice. However, we consider this phenomenon only within the chronological framework of modernity, which is characterized by an age-old linkage between climate change and the politicization of water as a resource. This implies the existence of a worldwide crisis caused by the impending scarcity of fresh water—the peculiarity of 21st-century discourse is the emphasis on both fresh and clean water. All of the above affects interstate relations and creates a new diplomacy format—hydropolitical relations. This means interstate engagement focusing on the issues of fresh water distribution or ensuring access to it. Technological and engineering solutions towards ensuring water supply are of great importance in this sphere. This factor distinguishes hydropolitics from geopolitics and other areas of political knowledge. Hydropolitics is a science that studies political power, water, and the role of hydraulic structures as tools of power control over water in the lives of many societies. All of the aforementioned characteristics allow one to approach hydropolitics as a distinct field, similar to geopolitics, and based on the neorealist theory.

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От геополитики к гидрополитике: в поисках границ дисциплины

А.В. Михалев 

Бурятский государственный университет им. Д. Банзарова, Улан-Удэ, Российская
Федерация

✉ mihalew80@mail.ru

Аннотация. Гидрополитика — это термин, широко распространившийся в XXI в. Его определения множественны и зачастую неоднозначны. Многообразие и противоречивость являются причиной повышенного внимания со стороны исследователей, поскольку формирует запрос на определенность. Цель исследования — проанализировать дефиниции и дисциплинарные претензии гидрополитики. В методологическом плане автор опирается на идеи формальной геополитики, которая позволяет рассмотреть проблемы водных ресурсов и власти в контексте возрастающего дефицита природных ресурсов. Наделение воды политическими смыслами и использование ее как символа — практика достаточно древняя. Однако мы рассматриваем это явление лишь в хронологических рамках современности, для которой характерна связь климатических изменений и политизации воды как ресурса. Это позволяет говорить о глобальном кризисе, вызванном приближающейся нехваткой пресной воды — особенностью политического дискурса в XXI в. является придание особой ценности не просто пресной, но и чистой воде. Все перечисленное влияет на межгосударственные отношения и создает новый формат дипломатии — гидрополитические отношения. Это взаимодействия государств, в основе которых вопрос о распределении пресной воды или об обеспечении доступа к ней. Большое значение в этой сфере имеют технологические и инженерные решения, позволяющие обеспечить поступления воды. Этот фактор отличает гидрополитику от геополитики и других отраслей политического знания. Гидрополитика — это наука о власти, воде и о значении гидротехнических сооружений как инструментов власти над водой в жизни различных сообществ. Все это позволяет говорить о гидрополитике как об особой дисциплине, близкой к геополитике и опирающейся на неореалистскую доктрину.

Ключевые слова: гидрополитика, ресурсный национализм, гегемония, вода, власть, политическое, климатические изменения, формальная геополитика

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

Water, power, and the politics—the connection among these three categories, vital for humans, is obvious when looking at history thoughtfully. And the nature of this connection changes from era to era. In the 21st century, the concepts of hydropolitics and hydroconflicts have come into wide circulation, which indicates the changes that have occurred in the realm of access to water resources. The UN World Water Development Report 2024 highlights that tensions over water resources are exacerbating conflicts around the world and that in order to maintain peace, states must strengthen international cooperation and expand transboundary agreements in this area.¹

This report notes a steadily developing trend that, based on the unconditional value of fresh water for human life, transforms the hydraulic into the political. The conflicts discussed in the report are evidence that society is divided into friends and enemies based on the presence or absence of access to water. Water is such an important resource in this situation that the division into friends and enemies can be based not only on the real but also on the potential, remote prospect of restricting access to it. This creates a special field of knowledge—hydropolitics—which reveals the relations of dominance and subordination based on the real or hypothetical right to dispose of water.

This section of political science is quite new, as it is only a little over 150 years old. Its content still contains terminological and semantic confusion: how to correctly conceptualize the relationship between water, power, and politics in the modern world. The discussion of these issues strongly depends on a variety of circumstances that can influence the course of such a discussion. One example is the economic scenario, in which the concept of “water is the new oil” is propagated.² Transitions from one discursive order to another (from political to economic) can radically change the meanings invested in definitions. This research focuses on assessing definitions and disciplinary claims about hydropolitics. Today, the collection of hydropolitics study already has several thousand publications in different languages. They are completely different in content and methodology, despite the fact that they seek answers to similar questions: what is the present and what is the possible future in the conditions of an impending water shortage, is this threat real or imaginary.

¹ UN Report: Water crisis as a threat to global security. Retrieved August 15, 2024, from <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2024/03/1450821#:~:text=%D0%92%D0%BE%20%D0%92%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%BC%20%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B5%20%D0%9E%D0%9E%D0%9D%20%D0%BE,%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8E%20%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2%20%D0%B2%D0%BE%20%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BC%20%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B5>

² Epilogue from Steve Solomon's *Water: The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power, and Civilization* // Circle of Blue. Retrieved August 15, 2024, from <https://www.circleofblue.org/2010/world/epilogue-from-steve-solomons-water-the-epic-struggle-for-wealth-power-and-civilization/>

However, methodological reflection is frequently overlooked and replaced with ideologically biased judgments about hegemony or national interests.

The analysis of these political judgments is the main objective of this study. The study clarifies the origin of the concept of “hydropolitics”, analyzes the discourse on hydropolitical relations and identifies the characteristics of the hydropolitical imagination as a way of understanding the relations of dominance and subordination associated with access to fresh water.

Hydropolitics in Search of Definition

The concept of hydropolitics, according to Italian researcher Mattia Grandi [2020], has no established definition. This problem arose as a result of the fact that different disciplinary fields understand hydropolitics differently. The term is used in political science, ecology, economics, sociology, engineering, and some others.

It is vital to acknowledge that hydropolitics is one of the oldest areas of political relations [Wittfogel 1957]. As technology developed, it transformed from the idea of managing a river and society in the conditions of primitive and unsafe hydro-objects to the idea of water shortages in the conditions of high technology and a global economy. Undoubtedly, hydropolitics as a practice has an ancient history associated with religious and philosophical views. However, as a scientific discipline, hydropolitics is a product of the 20th century. Although the first attempts to reflect on the topic of the connection between politogenesis and great rivers belong to Russian scientists of the 19th century—Lev Ilyich Mechnikov and Pyotr Evgenievich Kazansky, who studied the role of transboundary waterways as a factor in world politics [Mechnikov 2013; Kazansky 1895]. P.E. Kazansky cites an interesting quote from the speech of the French engineer Holtz at the fourth international congress of inland navigation in Manchester: “Rivers have acquired first-rank significance in the industrial struggle between nations and are one of the most effective means of international competition” [Kazansky 1895]. Thus, the first attempts to understand the political significance of water can be localized in the 19th century, and this process occurred simultaneously with the creation of the first geopolitical works of Friedrich Ratzel and Paul Vidal de la Blache.

The mid-20th century is associated with the name of Karl August Wittfogel [1957], who introduced the concepts of a hydraulic state and a hydraulic society into scientific circulation. Wittfogel’s ideas are important for us as intellectually significant metaphors that can be filled with modern content, but above all, they provide a reference to the world-historical context of the relationship between power and control over water resources. In his book “Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power”, published in 1957, Wittfogel created the concept of total power based on river management [Wittfogel 1957]. According to his hypothesis, the practice of water and irrigation management forms hydraulic empires. The concept of over-centralization of control over water as the basis of a total state is also significant for modern political theory,

although it has been repeatedly criticized by opponents. In the context of our research, Wittfogel's following thesis is interesting: "Hydraulic leadership is political leadership" [Wittfogel 1957]. It would seem that in this historical review the connection between water and politics was obvious, however, the conceptualization of this connection would begin later in the second half of the 20th century, under the influence of global changes. As a result, science had the terms "hydraulic society", "hydraulic state", "hydraulic empire", but came close to developing the category of "hydropolitics" only in the 1990s. This term was first introduced into scientific circulation by John Waterbury [1979]. Arun Elhance [1997] defined hydropolitics as "the systematic study of interstate conflicts and cooperation over transboundary water resources". The definition closest to our context is that of Julie Trottier: "Hydropolitics studies water conflicts with the aim of revealing the tensions between competing interests and of typifying the political, imaginary and symbolic relations that the water issue mobilizes" [Trottier 1999].

The pluralism of meanings is extremely difficult to overcome because, in addition to science, the term is employed in the media and public administration, increasing the number of interpretations and debates surrounding it. The logical issue of whether a final single definition is required yields a negative answer, as this is nearly impossible due to the wide range of ways of using the term hydropolitics. However, it is possible to attempt to draw boundaries in its application. Simultaneously, the theoretical reason for such a field remains unclear for some. For example, this area is frequently associated with geopolitics, despite the fact that geopolitics is literally the science of the earth and politics. This is due to geopolitics' well-developed toolbox, which has developed into a respected academic discipline in the 21st century, such as formal geopolitics. The demand for water necessitates a theoretical explanation of hydropolitics as a discipline (or subdiscipline, depending on the perspective).

The discussion of hydropolitics is closely related to the problems of water management, but it would be wrong to reduce all definitions to management alone. Hydropolitics as a phenomenon is much broader, since it covers the essence of the political with its Schmitt distinction between friends and enemies, which is especially acute in conditions of water shortage or competition for it. As a result, an antithesis to geopolitics arises—the concept of "hydropolitical relations", which are part of modern global politics [Zeitoun, Warner 2006]. This is a theory that analyzes interstate relations regarding water, be it transboundary rivers or other issues of water regulation. Here, the focus is often on specific aspects, especially hydroconflicts and hydrohegemony. Thus, hydropolitical relations come to the fore.

Hydropolitical Relations?

Interstate relations on water issues are usually called hydropolitical relations (HPR). Today it is an important part of international relations, as well as hydropolitics as a discipline and/or subdiscipline. This term has proven itself

to be quite stable and is now used both in analytical texts and in journalism. As problems associated with the shortage of fresh water in certain parts of the world increase, the role of hydropolitical relations is growing, and the concept of hydropolitical order is gaining its momentum, which complements the previous concept. In essence, all of the above represents the reception of terms from the theory of international relations. As a result, hydropolitics can quite reasonably be considered a part of it, refracted in the methodological framework of realism, liberalism, and neorealism.

Describing the current situation, Susanne Neubert and Waltina Scheumann note: “From the perspective of international relations theory, popular water geopolitics appears to be a product of crude political realism, since it equates the materialist ontology of realism with a narrow form of geographical determinism—‘hydrological determinism’” [Neubert, Scheumann 2003].

According to Stephen McCaffrey: “Hydropolitical interactions can, in some senses, be seen as a battleground of ideas and power. International lawyers have attempted to codify and standardize the management of this common resource; however, over time, competing legal doctrines have emerged for the management of international watercourses” [McCaffrey 2001]. This statement perfectly reveals the essence of hydropolitical relations, which can be understood as a balance between different legal doctrines on watercourse management. As has already been indicated earlier, the search for international legal solutions to transboundary water issues has been going on since the 19th century [see Kazansky 1895]. But lawyers and engineers of that time paid attention to and constantly underlined the special political significance of water not only as a drinking resource, but also as a transportation channel and source of energy. The definition of Richard Meissner fits well into this context, who defined hydropolitics as “transnational interaction through the creation and use of norms between a variety of non-state and state actors, from individuals to collectives, regarding the authoritative distribution and use, as well as the perception of domestic and international water resources” [Meissner 2005].

This concept has resulted in the 21st century discussion of not only the right to water, but also water nationalism as part of resource nationalism [Wheeler, Hussein 2021; Allouche 2020]. Its proponents argue that the right to a particular body of water can belong to a separate nation, considering it as a national treasure, citing certain cultural, historical and emotional grounds.

In addition, modern studies note the major role of affects in the system of hydropolitical relations [Sehring, Wolf 2023]. Affects imply irrational bases for political decisions related to water: religious, ideological, emotional. This topic is quite large, since a huge number of meanings attached to water have accumulated at the cultural level. However, the presence of affects in this area does not in any way cancel out neorealist paradigms in interpreting water problems, but rather complements them, helps to better reveal the content of the existing asymmetries.

Water, especially fresh water, has become part of modern foreign policy discourses. Despite the apparent distance from classical geopolitics, they still

inscribe territories, that is, waters on these territories, into axiological hierarchies of national or state interests. Such hierarchies are multiple, and each country, depending on its hydro-deficit or hydro-surplus, occupies a certain place in the imaginary hydropolitical order. This order is perceived as fair or unfair, again depending on the position of the state in the water redistribution system [see Mikhalev, Rakhimov 2024]. This gives rise to concepts of future hydro-hegemony (absolute or relative), which indirectly refer to the book by K. Wittfogel and form the modern discursive order.

As a result of a unique manner of viewing water as either a politically significant or outright political resource, hydropolitical relations are inextricably linked to world politics. The competition of such ideologies on the international stage creates a hydrolytic agenda. This agenda forms the foundation of interstate hydropolitical relations. All of the aforementioned is integrated with a set of engineering solutions for interstate water management and drainage control. As a result, hydropolitical relations consist of agreements, disagreements, or conflicts between countries about water distribution concerns, as well as various engineering and technological solutions.

Hydropolitical Imagination

The relationship between water and politics is a product of the modern political imagination. Of course, the practice of using water to subjugate communities and even as a weapon has been known since ancient times, but hydropolitics as a sphere of reflection is a recent phenomenon. The fact is that it is closely linked to the categories created in the modern era, with its political vocabulary. For example, the World Water Council (created in 1996) initiated the Water and Politics project, which aims to raise awareness of the importance of political issues in water reforms and to determine how politics can serve the water community.³ Imagination is impossible without descriptions, and one of the dominant discourses of modernity is the geopolitical discourse that gave birth to hydropolitics. In this situation, it is appropriate to quote Gaston Bachelard: “Imagination, entirely tied to a specific kind of matter, creates symbolic values. Water is the object of one of the greatest symbolic values ever created by human thought: the archetype of purity. What would the idea of purity be without the image of transparent and clear water, without this beautiful pleonasm—pure water?” [Bachelard 2024].

The idea of clean water is transformed into a natural right to clean water, and this right becomes political. The inaccessibility of clean water as a resource is a potential basis for the Schmitt distinction between friends and enemies. In this situation, the political imagination goes further, transforming the right to water into the idea of control over water. As a result, it becomes a politically significant resource, since it can serve as the basis for relations of domination and

³ World Water Council. Retrieved August 15, 2024, from http://www.cawater-info.net/library/rus/02_wwc.pdf

subordination. In this context, most left-wing theorists note the purely Gramscian theoretical basis of water domination [Menga 2016]. According to them, it is based on the hegemonic discourses and practices created by human society, and not on water itself.

Without a doubt, the shortage of fresh water has the same catastrophic consequences for humans as floods. The hydropolitical discourse operates on these threats and is capable of pressing for management and technological decisions on the rational organization of water resources [Bréthaut, Ezbakhe, McCracken, Wolf, Dalton 2022]. At the heart of such rational management is the idea of preventing water crises. It is closely related to dominance and unequal access to water. In essence, these are two sides of the same coin. But such relations are also closely connected with other factors of foreign policy (energy and climate), which allows for the formation of a balance at the level of hydropolitical relations—through access to other resources.

Here the second substantive aspect of water policy appears—access to water as an energy resource. Wittfogel's idea of the relationship between hydraulic structures and power becomes relevant again. However, this is not the only way to imagine water as a vital asset. In one of her works, Anastasia Likhacheva [2016], analyzes the concept of “virtual water” by John Anthony Alan. Virtual water is the amount of water invested in the production of food or other products, that is, in the context of the struggle for resources among world powers, various aspects of the value of fresh water can be revealed [see Likhacheva 2023]. Another clear example of the creation of images of water as an asset is the popular book by journalist Stephen Solomon “Water: The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power, and Civilization”. The author of the book expressed the idea that water is the new oil: “In an era of scarcity, when fresh water is becoming the new oil, industrial democracies have a huge comparative advantage in resources that they have yet to fully realize or exploit” [Solomon 2010].

As a result, we can quite reasonably speak of a hydropolitical imagination or a way of explaining political processes and technological decisions through a political vocabulary. The set of political categories of the hydropolitical imagination is mainly borrowed from realism and neorealism, as left-wing critics of the concept of water hegemony have repeatedly written about [see Julien 2012]. However, it is this method of interpretation that most clearly explains the situation with water, although this explanation is not always relevant. It has become well naturalized in the media, as well as in the sphere of public policy. Its boundaries are close to the political ecology criticized by Bruno Latour [2018], which does not so much defend the interests of ecology as the interests of people. As a result, the hydropolitical imagination is a way of explaining the world in the political interests of certain communities, corporations and states.

All three social dimensions of water: drinking, energy, and agricultural production—are closely linked to notions of security. Securitization is the foundation of geopolitical discourse, in which geographical objects are assigned the attributes of challenges and risks. Hydropolitics and geopolitics are interrelated

disciplines, two closely related ways of imagining the world. With its technological and engineering basis, hydropolitics appears much more convincing than geopolitics. This reference allows denying the fundamental role of political ideas and judgments, which can be both rational and irrational.

Conclusion

Reflection on the connection between water and politics has quite deep traditions. These traditions are based on religious views associated with the sacralization of water as a potential source of hegemony. But at the same time, there is a modern understanding of water based on economics and geopolitics. In this discourse, water is the most important resource. It is this approach that became the basis for hydropolitics, a discipline that is still looking for its definition. Addressing it requires an understanding that hydropolitics exists in two dimensions: as a form of knowledge and as practice. Practice is a set of engineering and technological decisions made on the basis of the policy of one or several states. Hydropolitics as academic and strategic knowledge is a sphere that records the change in political relations around water resources, as well as methods of hydropolitical imagination. First of all, geopolitics acts as a discourse about these political relations regarding access to water resources. Given the specifics of climate change in the 21st century, we are almost always talking about clean, fresh water. Difficulties in access to fresh water and humanitarian problems caused by its inaccessibility are only part of the challenges and threats that hydropolitics studies. The real state of affairs and the adoption of relevant decisions are often outside the discursive field of this discipline. However, it is hydropolitics that has a direct impact on public opinion; moreover, most media freely operate with the concepts of hydrohegemony and hydraulic power. In essence, hydropolitics is a conventional understanding at the level of the media and experts of the entire diversity of political relations around water. In the future, this discourse has every reason to become a special branch of political science.

Thus, hydropolitology is a theoretical sphere of knowledge about water and power, interstate relations, water resources, and the policy of technological regulation of water flows. This list can be significantly expanded by individual topics in the field of energy and agriculture. In general, the disciplinary framework of hydropolitics has yet to be determined, although the history of its categorical apparatus, as evidenced by the works of L.I. Mechnikov, spans nearly 150 years.

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About the author:

Alexey V. Mikhalev — Doctor of Political Sciences, Director of the Centre for Political Transformations Studies, Buryat State University (e-mail: mihalew80@mail.ru) (ORCID: 0000-0001-7069-2338)