

# 'Oil Then,' 'Water Now': Another Reason for War in the 21st Century?

Written by Strobe Driver

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STROBE DRIVER, JUN 22 2015

### Why Oil?

The pursuit of oil has a long and tortured history in the Western world, both in terms of gaining access; the imposition of European colonialism in order to maintain access; and from the ongoing need to maintain a constant supply. Crude oil, or more precisely the petrol-oil-lubricants (POL) that are derived from its numerous post-drill processes have been vital to the progress of Western nation-states in general. The commensurate knowledge and understanding that in order to keep Western living standards—through the industrial and mechanical base that comprises progress— their societies were, and remain, dependent on oil. In more contemporary times, these factors are also important for many Asian, Middle Eastern, Eastern and Eurasian societies although the European West such as Canada, Australia, and the United States of America and Western 'offshoots' such as Japan and Singapore, would continue to develop and expand upon the base of oil as a prime driver of their economies. Oil over time became an exponentially important and vital source for the upward progress of modern nation-states and to be sure, guaranteed ongoing growth. Notwithstanding, the numerous factors underlying the importance of POL to the continued advancement of countries are far too numerous for this essay and only several need to be, albeit briefly, highlighted to emphasise the standing of POL has within the realm of domestic and international geo-strategic; and geo-political influences.

### Committing to Oil

The tenet of POL as a resource can be observed in the British Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill *circa*-1912 making the decision to produce 'oil only' ships, the *Queen Elizabeth*-class destroyers that were designed to meet a rising Weimar German Republic due. The decision was made for tactical-advantage as burning oil produced greater speed for battleships when compared to the cumbersome and problematics of coal-fired, or 'coal-oil' combinations.[1] Churchill's pragmatic commitment to oil is able to be observed in the statement '... for the first time, the supreme ships of the navy, on which our life depended, were fed by oil and could only be fed by oil ... '[2] This tactical and strategic commitment to POL once made, would have an incremental and then exponential building capacity for the Royal Navy, and would go on to influence the machinery-of-war for decades to come. To be certain, the dedication Britain had to its navy is due to its survival as an island-nation and therefore had a heavy reliance on its defence through immediate naval superiority—indeed, Bonaparte *circa*-1810 would complain of being unable to invade Britain due to the 'wooden wall' of the British Navy[3]—and due to its ongoing colonisation practices became increasingly dependent on sea-going capabilities in order to sustain its protectorates and defend multiple coastlines, which in turn made Britain ever-reliant on having sea-borne trade to keep its economy robust. The outcome for Britain would be at the beginning of World War One having the most powerful 'oil-driven' navy in the world.[4] From the early-twentieth century the reliance on POL would only grow.

The total war of World War Two would also thrust the need for POL into the forefront of operations. Germany would push toward the Russian (now Azerbaijan) oilfields of Baku where a staggering seventy-two percent of the Soviet's oil-needs stemmed from,[5] and moreover, the urgency of and for POL, in a sense 'forced' Nazi Germany to invade Russia.[6] The reliance on oil for a nation at war and the desperation for the resource can also be observed in the

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push by Japan into Southeast Asia with the taking of Malaya, and Singapore in World War Two. The push was in part, driven by an ever-burgeoning necessity as Japan needed oil reserves that would allow it to wage a successful war; and was constricted as a resource-dependent island. For instance, the Imperial Japanese Navy required 400 tons of oil per hour to maintain its 'war readiness' and this factor combined with the refusal of the British, the United States of America (US) and the Netherlands to restrict market access and oil as Japan became increasingly cosmopolitan and a regional superpower further reinforced in Japanese military hierarchies that Southeast Asia had to be conquered in order to maintain adequate oil supplies,[7] and moreover Japan understood the geo-strategic and geo-political threats that powerful nation-states could pose having experienced both at the hands of the British, Dutch and the US from *circa*-1900 onwards.[8] From these experiences, and bearing in mind its geography—that of an island nation with needs and colonies not dissimilar to Britain's—Japan from the outset was desperate to secure a constant supply of oil in order to sustain a war-effort; and to win a protracted conflict especially if the destruction of the US Pacific Fleet was incomplete.

In more contemporary times the dependence on oil either as a fiscal resource or as political leverage can be observed in the US planning to send troops to a Saudi Arabia in the oil crisis of the early-1970s in order to secure supply.[9] The Iran-Iraq War which was largely funded by oil revenues by both belligerents; the acceptance of the Shah of Iran's despotic rule in Iran by Western liberal-democracies in order to retain oil access; and the reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers in a dispute between several Middle East nations in the Persian Gulf which was able to legally elicit US military protection (1980-1987),[10] offers an insight into the fractiousness that oil has formed.

And to mention that the acute pursuit of oil in the twentieth century has not significantly altered in the twenty-first century per se is an important yet, germane point to make and moreover, whilst the abovementioned is not an exhaustive in description with regard to oil, it does offer an insight into the commitment and desperation that oil, as a commodity, has bedevilled governments. Oil still retains the ability as a mechanism-for-dispute amongst nations, however it is a broad yet accurate statement to presume that as oil declines as a primary source for development and security needs as other energy resources are incrementally and then exponentially developed oil will 'shift' as a prime resource and thus, oil will, in all probability no longer be a principal source of hostilities. Another commodity is beginning to develop 'on the horizon,' and occupy the mind of governments: fresh water.

### **Water: The 'New Oil'?**

The importance of water as a method-of-control has recently come to the fore and been highlighted in the desperation of Iraqi forces as they fought to regain, and then hold, the Mosul Dam. The strike and counter-strike components of the battle involved (northern) Kurdish forces, Iraqi forces and US air-strikes that were combined in order to, in the first instance, retard the advances of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the second, to push ISIS out of the strategic location.[11] Whilst this remains a fluid situation at the time of writing, it does illustrate that part of war strategy is to control fresh water supplies.

Control of fresh water in order for human survival directly through hydration and indirectly via associated health outcomes such as irrigation for the growing of foodstuffs; and its use for sewage processing and/or removal is a germane yet necessary point to make. For many nations, water and the desperation to retain control over it has already gained some notoriety. A point in case is the control of water, once established is difficult for countries to relinquish, and this is illustrated by Israel's ongoing control of the Golan Heights which was originally won in the Six-Day War of 1967 as the water therein supplies at times, one-third of Israel's water needs.[12] Whilst the continued unilateral annexing of the Golan Heights by Israel disregards United Nations protocols—through the prisms of 'decolonization'[13] and the 'right of all people to self-determination'[14] in their own land—and of occupied land having to be returned to the country of origin after a conflict is over, or in simpler terms 'Colonialism/Colonisation and/or prolonged occupation' since 1990[15] through mechanisms and processes of the United Nations essentially has no legal status in the international community. Nevertheless, all offer an insight into increasing the likelihood of access to water giving rise to continued conflict and ongoing tensions.

Notwithstanding, the continued and deliberate non-cooperation and dismissal of internationally recognised conventions by Israel paradoxically, highlights the strategic importance of water to a nation's survival. And it is

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further prudent to note, 'a water war was also hidden in the 1965 fighting between India and Pakistan, in mountainous Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan's military objective was to take an area where three rivers collected a substantial portion of their flows. In all, the United Nations counts thirty-seven cases of water-related violence between nations since the end of the Second World War.'<sup>[16]</sup> The issues that drive a crisis of water are multifaceted and too large to investigate in this essay per se, suffice to state there are two major components that contribute to water crises. Years of mismanagement by the domestic government of a nation and/or a state can be observed by simply highlighting different attitudes to water as a resource: the non-intervention and therefore a lack of prudent government monitoring of water use by the population as in the case within India,<sup>[17]</sup> and a neglectful attitude to water being a finite resource that has been the case in California.<sup>[18]</sup>

## **Water: The Possibility of Conflict**

Underpinning the issue of water for the world in general is however, that populations and their governments are becoming more politically astute and cosmopolitan toward the role that water plays in their ongoing progress and development—as the awareness and state-of-affairs that was once attributed to oil. Within this continuum governments are now moving to geo-strategically and geo-politically assert and then hold what they perceive as 'their' water supply. This factor—complete ownership of what is often a trans-boundary resource—is causing intra-regional tensions, which have the potential of outright hostility. Egypt and Ethiopia are perhaps the most likely to clash with regard to the water possession cum ownership issue: Egypt historically, has threatened to go to war with Ethiopia if it 'barricaded' the Nile, however with the onset of the Arab Spring and at the height of the chaos—when the Egyptian government was preoccupied with its own survival—Ethiopia began building the world's eighth largest hydroelectric dam which, according to Egypt was essentially, 'barricading the Nile.'<sup>[19]</sup>

The above elements being a part of coming frictions notwithstanding, the core component of impending water wars is population growth. In 1974 the world's four-billionth baby was born, in 1987 the five-billionth, and in October 1999 the six-billionth—by 2050 the estimated population of the Earth will be a staggering nine-billion people.<sup>[20]</sup> The number of people on the Earth is not a problem per se, and neither is the issue that the World is 'running out of water,' as 'water never technically disappears. When it leaves one place, it goes somewhere else, and the amount of fresh water on earth has not changed significantly for millions of years.'<sup>[21]</sup> The issue has become one of competition for a finite resource that crosses borders. In doing so the use of water: whether through damming, lax environmental or other inputs political tensions are created from the domestic populace down-river. A brief explanation of the role water plays in the life of a community is needed here in order to fully grasp the 'knock on' effect that water plays in a community's life blood.

Apart from the germane associations such as people's general health and wellbeing and their ongoing investment in the 'social capital' of their community fresh water also allows for 'mercantilism' to be abundant; and robust. Mercantilism is a complex concept and far too in depth to enter into here, suffice to outline that it allows for fiscal and emotional wealth to exist—one element reinforcing the other and interchangeable. According to McNeil, these concepts when becoming a reality within a community encourages and reinforce a formal 'centre' which acts as a motivator for the populace to embrace cohesiveness, and whilst this may begin with the elite of a community the commitment, or the act of loyalty to community, allows for the creation of community-driven 'social identities'<sup>[22]</sup> to become 'autocatalytic'—a self-sustaining process.<sup>[23]</sup> For a country's ruling elite, whether a democracy or otherwise, there is for politicians, the ever-present threat of the tensions within the domestic populace escalating due to their requirements not being met, and a significant impact on the ability of people to earn a living has in the past had dire consequences, often ending in 'violent- or passive-revolution.'<sup>[24]</sup> Governments of all persuasions are acutely aware of how critical elements can provoke immediate reactions in the populace. It is safe to argue water as a catalyst is no different than what has gone before, and it is at this point that a modern-day immediate dilemma is able to be introduced, in order to observe potential nation-state ramifications.

## **China, Egypt and South Korea: Three Contemporary Examples of the 'Water Dilemma'**

China is aware of the abovementioned and the People's Republic of China (PRC) government is attempting balance its available water resources in order to decrease the threat of intra-regional disputes, especially if a conflict required

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the input of the People's Liberation Army. Hence China in order to avert future domestic issues has according to Lewis embarked on dam-building on an unprecedented scale in human history. This can be summed up thus,

The [PRC] government is now engaged in a new expansion of dams in great staircases, reservoir upon reservoir — some 130 in all across China's Southwest. By 2020 China aims to generate 120,000 megawatts of renewable energy, most of it from hydroelectric power. The government declares that such dams are safe, avoid pollution, address future climate change, control floods and droughts, and *enhance human life*. [25]

The PRC central government is aware that three hundred million people in the countryside lack access to safe drinking water and the situation is set to worsen as China's cities expand; and more to the point water-stressed provinces export food products to rainfall-rich areas.[26] This has the potential to cause a domestic imbalance within China and by default impact upon the ongoing progress of China internationally. According to *Worldview*, the issue for China is the high probability of domestic conflicts over water.[27] To wit, the situation will increase in volatility unless water-management strategies are adopted. The PRC government has a plan to overcome the current situation as Mao Zedong alerted the country of its water needs fifty years ago, and although short-term implementation will also be required, lest the domestic situation become a drag on China's international ambitions the PRC has launched the largest water-pipeline project in world history—the first phase began operation in 2014.[28] The PRC understands a 'business-as-usual' scenario will not suffice for the future and more pertinent to the ambitions of China, the simple truth of history, is that a country cannot expand extramural to its own borders unless there is peace at home. To wit, the PRC has shown that it has enormous territorial ambitions to reclaim what it believes to be traditionally and historically 'their' territory: the 'Paracel and Spratly island chains'[29] being the most recent.

Understanding how water as a resource has now developed into a commodity that has international repercussions—as oil once did—can be observed by Patrick in the *Journal of American Water Works Association* (as quoted by Ahmed), which explains that the grain price spikes contributed to Egypt's 2011 uprising, were primarily caused by 'droughts in major grain-exporting countries like Australia...'[30]. Moreover, South Korea's persistent water shortages which had culminated in reduced harvests led to the toppling of Madagascar's leader in 2009 due to a commercially arranged 'land grab' that was attempted by South Korea in Madagascar to ensure its food supply remained stable. However, in the process arable land for Madagascans was reduced and a water crisis ensued,[31] further indicating the pursuit of fresh water as a resource, can spread trouble from one part of the globe to another.[32]

## Conclusion

The abovementioned offers an insight into what oil once 'was' and how water has now become a most sought after commodity, one that countries have displayed a renewed interest in and with an increasing amount of threat-of-force. Whether the frictions over oil will continue at the current rate is a moot point and does not need defining further here, as what is of importance in contemporary times is how water has incrementally begun to override oil as a commodity that is of most benefit to a country—in a sense water has replaced oil as the resource that nation-states must have if they are to prosper. Fresh water has now come to the fore as a vital component for internal political security, extramural expansion and geo-political stability, and if oil as a commodity, be positioned as a guide to the future, water wars have transformed into a probability rather than a possibility.

## Notes

[1] Erik Dahl. 'Naval Innovation: From Coal to Oil.' *Joint Force Quarterly*. Winter, 2000-01, 50-53.

[2] Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis*, Vol. 1 New York: Scribner's, 1923, 133-136.

[3] Philippe-Paul De Ségur. *Defeat. Napoleon's Russian Campaign*. Translated by David Townsend. New York: New York Review of Books, 1986, xxiv.

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[4] John Simkin. *Royal Navy and the First World War*.

[5] Michael Antonucci. 'Blood for Oil: The Quest for Fuel Oil in World War Two.' *Military History and Espionage*.

[6] Hitler stated, "The most important aim to be reached before the onset of winter is not to capture Moscow, but to seize the Crimea and the industrial and coal region on the Donets, and cut off the Russian oil supply from the Caucasus area." See: *Military History and Espionage*.

[7] Peter Chen. 'Invasion of Malaya and Singapore.' *World War II Database*.

[8] A deeper insight into the reasons why the Pacific phase of World War II would be launched by the Japanese can be observed through the prism of a 'retribution' for past practices. Chomsky avers, 'By the 1920s, England could not compete with more efficient Japanese industry. It therefore called the [Free Market] game off, returning to the practices that allowed it to develop in the first place. The empire was effectively closed to Japanese trade; Dutch and Americans followed suit. These were among the steps on the road to the Pacific phase of World War II [triggered by the Pearl Harbor attack] and among those ignored in the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations.' See: Noam Chomsky. *Power and Prospects. Reflections on Human Nature and the Social Order*. Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1996, 102.

[9] Glenn Frankel. 'U.S. Mulls Seizing Oil Fields In '73. British Memo Cites Notion of Sending Airborne [Troops] to Mideast.' *WashingtonPost.com*. The plan is also referred to as *Dhahran Option Four* and is articulated in by Shenkman in *Saudi Arabia's Domsday Plan* as, 'In 1973 the British were told by American Defense Secretary James Schlesinger that the United States might use force to maintain open access to the key oil fields of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi. Two years later, in 1975, the *Sunday Times* of London published an account of a classified American plan, "Dhahran Option Four," which provided for an American invasion to seize the oil wells of Saudi Arabia. In an interview with the media in 1975, Henry Kissinger publicly acknowledged that the United States might use force to free up oil supplies in the Middle East to save the West from strangulation.' See: Rick Shenkman. 'Saudi Arabia's Domsday Plan.' *HistoryNewsNetwork*.

[10] Elizabeth Gamlin and Paul Rogers. 'U.S. Reflagging of Kuwaiti Tankers.' *The Iran-Iraq War. The Politics of Aggression*. Edited by Farhang Rajaei. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1988, 124 -125.

[11] 'Battle rages for control of Mosul Dam.' *AlJazeera*. 18 Aug, 2014.

[12] Golan Heights profile – Overview. *British Broadcasting Corporation*. 15 Feb, 2015.

[13] See: 'Committee of 24 (Special Committee on Decolonization).' *The United Nations and Decolonization*.

[14] See: *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the Court of International Justice*. Chapters VI – VII.

[15] See: 'International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism (1990 – 2000). *The United Nations and Decolonization*.

[16] Gordon Chang. 'Blue Gold: The Coming Water Wars.' *World Affairs*. 2013.

[17] See: Sonia Luthra and Amrita Kundu. 'India's Water Crisis: Causes and Cures.' *The National Bureau of Asian Research*. 13 Aug, 2013. '... poor water quality resulting from insufficient and delayed investment in urban water-treatment facilities. Water in most rivers in India is largely not fit for drinking, and in many stretches not even fit for bathing. Despite the Ganga Action Plan, which was launched in 1984 to clean up the Ganges River in 25 years, much of the river remains polluted with a high coliform count at many places. The facilities created are also not properly maintained because adequate fees are not charged for the service. Moreover, industrial effluent standards are not enforced because the state pollution control boards have inadequate technical and human resources.'

[18] Jeff Spross. 'California has given out rights to five times more water than it has.' 20 Aug, 2014.

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[19] Fred Pearce. 'On the River. A Move to Avert a Conflict Over Water.' *Yale Environment 360*. 12 Mar, 2015.

[20] 'Human numbers through time.' *Public Broadcasting Service*.

[21] Michael Specter. 'A Thirsty Violent World.' 24 Feb, 2015. *The New Yorker*.

[22] William McNeill. *The Human Condition. An Ecological and Historical View*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980, 65.

[23] *The Human Condition*, 65 – 66.

[24] A recent violent revolution can be observed in the revolution that took place in Romania and was premised on Communist Leader Nicolae Ceausescu not being able to be protected by the Soviet Union, and the population policies that were in place and then the State being unable to meet the employment/sustainability prospects of a young population. See: William Horsely. 'Romania's Bloody Revolution.' *BBC News*. 22 Dec, 1999. Passive revolutions however are much more 'streamlined' and although they represent change are much more 'socially-driven' and is often attached to a 'civil disobedience' campaign. Perhaps the most famous is that of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi seeking the independence of India. See: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: Passive and Peaceful Revolution.

[25] Charlton Lewis. 'China's Great Dam Boom: A Major Assault on Its Rivers.' *Environment 360*. 4 Nov, 2013. Italics mine.

[26] Vaughan Winterbottom. 'Water wars; China's rivers are set to be a source of conflict.' 8 Jan, 2015.

[27] See: Vaughan Winterbottom. 'Water wars; China's rivers are set to be a source of conflict.' 8 Jan, 2015.

[28] 'China has Launched the largest Water-Project in World History.' *The Atlantic*. 7 Mar, 2014.

[29] 'Q&A: South China Sea dispute.' *British Broadcasting Corporation*. 17 Apr, 2015.

[30] Nafeez Ahmed. 'New Age of water wars portends 'bleak future.' *Middle East Eye*. 19 Mar, 2015. Robert Patrick *Journal of American Water Works Association*.

[31] 'South Korea Food Security Concerns Prompt Land Grab.' *Strategic Weekly Analysis*. 18 Apr, 2011.

[32] See: Gordon Chang. 'Blue Gold: The Coming Water Wars.' *World Affairs*. 2013.

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### About the author:

**Strobe Driver** completed a PhD in War Studies in 2010 and since then has been writing on War, Conflict, Terrorism and Asia-Pacific Security. During 2018 he was awarded a year-long Taiwan, ROC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fellowship to write an independent analysis of Taiwan – China relations with a focus on when and whether a conflict would break out. The analysis is entitled 'Asia-Pacific and Cross-Strait Machinations: Challenges for Taiwan in the Nascent Phase of Pax-Sino.' All other writings by Strobe can be found on his blog.