



Frederick D. Gordon. *Freshwater Resources and Interstate Cooperation: Strategies to Mitigate an Environmental Risk.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2008. xii + 172 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-7635-2.



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Fresh Water and International Politics

Fresh water, long taken for granted, is rapidly becoming one of the world's most pressing environmental problems. As Frederick Gordon notes in *Freshwater Resources and Interstate Cooperation*, over 1.5 billion people, many of them in Asia and Africa, sadly suffer the many medical and economic hardships related to inadequate access to fresh drinking water, a number many expect to more than double in the next two decades. At least twenty-five nations will have to increase their supplies of fresh water by more than 200 percent in the next sixteen years to avoid the specter of absolute water scarcity. More directly to the point, many of the most severely affected nations, including some of those already in absolute water scarcity (e.g., Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria) are bitter political rivals. When one adds to this volatile mixture of growing demand and embedded political rivalries the fact that about three hundred freshwater basins traverse international borders, one cannot help but conclude that the potential for freshwater conflict is enormous (p. 12). Although increasingly likely, the future need not be one of

intensifying freshwater shortages and conflict. For Gordon, successfully managing the freshwater crisis turns on fully appropriating the lessons of the past. Gordon's study is as much an argument about how to discover those lessons as it is an interpretation of their content.

Gordon's analysis builds from the perfectly valid presumption that no one discipline or methodology can fully explain the politics of interstate water disputes and accords. He practices what he preaches. Drawing from nine different theories (common pool resource, shared incentives, global governance, ecological modernization, discourse analysis, negotiation, democratic peace, geopolitical, conjunctive management, and epistemic), each briefly surveyed in chapter 2, and employing both quantitative and qualitative approaches, Gordon tests nine different hypotheses, all toward the goal of answering two key research questions: (1) "How are nation states able to overcome collective action problems to achieve interstate water accords?" and (2) "What factors make accords so resilient?" (p. 122).

Gordon's questions reflect what many will surely find a surprising fact: nations largely do not wage violent conflict over water. Citing the extensive work of Aaron Wolf on this subject, Gordon happily notes that at the sub-acute level, which defines most water interactions, cooperative relations dominate the history of international water relations (p. 14).^[1] The frequency of interstate cooperation, however, no matter how well documented, is not in and of itself an explanation of just how and why nations cooperate. Promoting the nonviolent resolution of freshwater issues well into an increasingly difficult future rests on overcoming this "analytic void" (p. 50).

Gordon proceeds on two fronts. On the first front, Gordon subjects the sixty-eight water accords reached between 1950 and 1999 to a quantitative assessment centered on identifying the factors leading to a successful outcome. He scores the sixty-eight different accords in terms of the signing and/or ratification of a treaty, the kind of water distribution enacted (none, some, equitable), and the number of parties involved (bilateral or multilateral). Key findings include the observations that multilateral accords, although fewer in number, display levels of interstate cooperation roughly equal to that of bilateral accords; the number of treaties signed and ratified far exceed instances of actual water redistribution; water scarcity alone does not explain a nation's willingness to negotiate and cooperate; and "negotiation and common pool resource theories appear to yield the highest explanatory value" (p. 59).

To his credit, Gordon does not rely solely on a quantitative analysis of interstate cooperation. A thorough analysis of the issue, he argues, must also incorporate the qualitative analysis of, among others, history, cul-

ture, environmental value, and the grounds for political trust. Gordon tackles this requirement in chapters 4-6. Each chapter presents a politically significant case of international freshwater politics. Chapter 4 features the Israeli-Palestinian Water Interim Accords of 1993-1995, which Gordon describes as a case of low-level cooperation. The Lesotho Highlands Water Accords of 1986, analyzed in chapter 5, represent a medium level of interstate cooperation. Gordon addresses the highest level of cooperation with a chapter on the 1994 Convention on Cooperation for the Protection and Sustainable Use of the River Danube. As Gordon himself notes, the results are mixed at best. For example, the significance of political trust, shared incentives, and internal support differ sharply across the three cases.

Mixed results complicate Gordon's quest for clear answers to his two key research questions, and they raise doubts about our collective ability to successfully manage the unfolding freshwater crisis. Gordon's "ultimate finding" (p. 102) is that nations prefer procedural to substantive politics—that is to say, they are far more willing to sign water accords than meaningfully redistribute available fresh water. Given this "bifurcated" (p. 102) outcome, it remains "unknown whether current cooperation is sufficient to overcome future water scarcity" (p. 108). *Freshwater Resources and Interstate Cooperation* is a welcome addition to the literature, but more for its valuable focus on how best to approach the puzzle of interstate cooperation than in terms of the answers generated.

Note

[1]. See in particular Aaron Wolf, Shira Yoffe, and Mark Giordano, "International Waters: Identifying Basins at Risk," *Water Policy* 5 (2003):29-60.

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