

Marek MUSIOŁ 

University of Wrocław, Institute of International and Security Studies, Poland

Hydropolitical Security Analysis: The Importance of Water Weaponisation in the Securitisation Process of the Rogun Dam in Central Asia

Hydropolityczna analiza bezpieczeństwa – znaczenie „weaponizacji” wody w procesie sekurytyzacji Zapory Rogun w Azji Środkowej

• Abstract •

In the article, I will delve into the hydropolitical security conditions stemming from the weaponisation of the natural environment, specifically focusing on water access. The significance of this existential challenge arises not only from the limited global drinking water resources (comprising merely 3%), but also from the escalating use of water as a potential – albeit not always practical – means of direct or indirect coercion in international relations. To address these concerns, I will employ hydropolitics, securitisation theory, speech act analysis, and a case study approach, utilising the Tajik investment project exemplified by the Rogun Dam. The article aims to contribute value by scrutinising the securitisation process components, including speech acts, pertaining to this issue. Additionally, it will explore the role of weaponisation as a factor in enhancing the construction of an existential threat within this process.

Keywords: hydropolitics; water; securitisation; weaponization; Central Asia; Rogun Dam; Tajikistan; Uzbekistan; water conflicts

• Abstrakt •

W artykule poruszę zagadnienie hydropolitycznych uwarunkowań bezpieczeństwa jako skutków „weaponizacji” środowiska naturalnego na przykładzie dostępu do wody. Znaczenie tego egzystencjalnego problemu wynika nie tylko z relatywnie niskiego poziomu zasobów wody pitnej na świecie (zaledwie 3%), lecz także z coraz częstszego wykorzystywania wody jako potencjalnego – choć nie zawsze urealnionego – środka przymusu pośredniego lub bezpośredniego w relacjach pomiędzy państwami. Do zbadania podjętej problematyki wykorzystam hydropolitykę, teorię sekurytyzacji, analizę aktów mowy oraz studium przypadku, tj. tadżycki projekt inwestycyjny w postaci Zapory Rogun. Wałorem artykułu będzie analiza elementów składowych procesu sekurytyzacji (w tym aktów mowy) odnoszących się do rozważanego problemu. Dodatkowo zbadana zostanie rola „weaponizacji” jako czynnika usprawniającego konstruowanie zagrożenia egzystencjalnego w ramach tego procesu.

Słowa kluczowe: hydropolityka; woda; sekurytyzacja; „weaponizacja”; Azja Środkowa; Zapora Rogun; Tadżykistan; Uzbekistan; konflikty o wodę

Introduction

The subject of the article is the analysis of hydropolitical security conditions and the importance of the process of water weaponisation in the securitisation of the Rogun Dam in Central Asia. My interest in this issue results directly from the need to continue in-depth research that I carried out in Kazakhstan and Russia in 2013, Canada in 2015, China in 2017, and France in 2019 and 2022. Then, thanks to field research conducted in centres such as OSCE in Astana, CARICC in Almaty, KIMEP University in Almaty, MGIMO in Moscow, MGU in Moscow, Dalhousie University in Halifax, Shanghai University, INHESJ in Paris, IRSEM in Paris, and Sciences Po Bordeaux – Centre Emile Durkheim, as well as numerous interviews with experts of these institutions, my research directions in the field of securitisation and regional security complexes were focused on the application possibilities of the Copenhagen School methodology and non-military security sectors, including water security. The result of this research work is the development of this scientific article.

Concerning the existing literature dealing with a similar approach to the issue of water, the following works are worth attention, in particular: M.D. King, *The Weaponization of Water in Syria and Iraq*; A. Krzymowski, *Water as a Weapon of War in the Tigris–Euphrates Basin; Turkey/Syria: Weaponizing Water in Global Pandemic?*; M.D. King, *Weaponizing Water: Water Stress and Islamic Extremist Violence in Africa and the Middle East*. However, none of the above-mentioned studies emphasises the existing feedback between the weaponisation and securitisation of water as an essential element of the security language used, including within the formulated speech acts.

In the context of the proposed research methodology, to examine the issues discussed, I will use the prism of hydropolitics, securitisation theory, analysis of verbal and non-verbal speech acts and a case study (i.e., the Tajik investment project in the form of the Rogun Dam). The value of the article will be the analysis of the components of the securitisation process (including speech acts) regarding this problem and the use of the process of weaponisation as a factor in improving the process of constructing an existential threat. The caesura covers the period from the commencement of the hydropower project in Tajikistan (i.e., from 1976). Nevertheless, I will devote the utmost attention to the period of greatest tension in Uzbek–Tajik relations, which occurred in 2012–2015. However, the end date is the withdrawal of opposition by the new Uzbek authorities after the death of Islam Karimov, which took place finally and through diplomatic channels in 2017 (Putz, 2017)¹.

¹ In 2017, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, Abdulaziz Komilov, in a televised speech

The essential research questions in this area include:

- How did the authorities of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan securitise the water problem related to the Rogun Dam?
- What were the key components of this process?
- Has the weaponisation of water in the adopted security language improved the process of securitisation of this problem?

Therefore, the research hypothesis is as follows: the weaponisation of water was an integral part of the security language in the securitisation process of the Rogun Dam in Central Asia.

Hydropolitics – its contemporary meaning and state of research

In recent decades, water – in its physicochemical nature – has become increasingly important in the sphere of politics and security at the academic level, including in the context of research on dams as cross-border international problems (see: Waterbury, 1979; Turton & Henwood, 2002; Meissner, 2016; Moore, 2018; Folch, 2019). Its progressive politicisation or, in extreme cases, securitisation are becoming equally important. As part of the water research process perceived in this way, hydropolitics becomes useful as an analytical tool for understanding how countries shape their policies and behaviours and use water in the process of the transboundary management system of this resource. Hydropolitics allows us to see the importance of the water problem and its significance for the politics and security of states.

This term was first introduced by J. Waterbury in 1979 in the book *Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley*. He then defined hydropolitics as “the study of interstate politics regarding the management of shared water resources” (Geneva Water Hub, 2021). Nowadays, hydropolitics or water policy, as part of the broader field of environmental policy and conflict studies (Wilner, 2005), do not have a clear definition. In English terminology, it refers to a concept of *water politics* or *hydropolitics* (Turton, 2003, Chapter 1, p. 7)². For example, according to the definition by A.P. Elhance, hydropolitics constitutes “the systematic study of conflicts and cooperation among states over water resources that transcend national boundaries” (1997, p. 218).

on July 5, 2017, stated that Tashkent was withdrawing its opposition to the project, provided that the already signed agreements and conventions are respected.

² A.R. Turton says that “Hydropolitics as a discipline is relatively new and generally lacks conceptual rigour. It is also being developed by scholars from a variety of disciplines, each with their own set of core concepts and perceptions of reality, resulting in the fact that many hydropolitical concepts are used interchangeably with a high degree of ambiguity”.

R. Meissner proposes a broader approach as “a systematic study of the interactions between states, non-state actors, and multiple other actors, such as entities within and outside the state, in the authoritative allocation and/or use of international and domestic water resources” (Meissner, 1998, pp. 4–5). In this semantic context, P.P. Mollinga classifies hydropolitics into four categories: “everyday politics of water resources management, water policy in the context of sovereign states, interstate hydropolitics and global water policy” (2008, p. 12). Finally, R.-G. Maury uses hydropolitics as “the investigation of water conflicts in order to uncover the tensions among competing interests, as well as the types of political, imaginary and symbolic relations which the issue of water mobilizes” (1994, p. 123; see also: Trottier, 1999, p. 3). This last attempt to define water policy is closest to the subject of this article as it takes into account not only cross-border disputes and conflicts³ regarding the exhaustion of water resources for consumption and/or industrial purposes, but also its physical availability, legal conditions (progressive privatisation), pollution and use as an influencing factor in media or propaganda messages, as well as tools to exert pressure on other entities.

The latter method embodies both a pragmatic and materialistic stance towards the issues of water and its weaponisation as a potential cause of international armed conflicts. Primarily, it underscores a symbolic and deliberately created existential threat. Hence, it is advisable to incorporate terms like ‘weaponisation’ and ‘securitisation’ at this juncture in the study.

Weaponisation and its role in the securitisation process

‘Weaponisation’ refers to the conscious action of actors, the aim of which is to give a new military meaning to objects, phenomena, processes and security issues that have not been perceived in the international space so far (such as information, migrations, culture, natural environment, etc.). Therefore, the process of weaponisation leads directly and indirectly to the adaptation of a given object to the function of a weapon in international relations, including between state actors. The term was first introduced in the 1930s (Grant, 1938). However, the more contemporary meaning has developed since the 1940s and 1950s, when the emphasis was placed on the military conditions of this process.

³ In this context, the problem of water hegemony as a research approach also arises (see also: Warner, 2008; Cascão & Zeitoun, 2010).

‘Securitisation’ is defined as a process in which a securitising entity identifies a specific issue or entity as an existential threat to a particular object of reference and the move is accepted by the appropriate audiences (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 201; see also: Musioł, 2015, 2018, 2019). “The essence of this theory is that something becomes a security problem not only because it poses an objective threat to the state (as in neorealism), but becomes a security problem when the securitising actor (very often the state) argues that something is an existential threat to an important reference object and must be addressed whenever the goal is survival” (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 21). It enables the use of emergency measures to control the threat. In the securitisation process, it is not important whether a given threat is actually real – what matters is that it is perceived as such by potential recipients. For this purpose, problems are transformed by actors in international relations into existential threats by changing their rank in the formulated speech acts. In this case, there is a process of transferring a given issue from the sphere of ordinary politics to the sphere of security.

The correlation between weaponisation and securitisation characterised the state of relations in Central Asia, where water problems in the region – with a strong emphasis on its military dimension (treatment as a tool of political pressure, a means of coercion, a threat to the survival of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, perceived in terms of war–peace, *casus belli*) – have undergone and are undergoing transformation from the sphere of ordinary politics as part of the political agenda of states to the security discourse at the national, regional, and global levels. This means that if water scarcity is perceived as an existential threat, the securitisation of this facility reveals that it is part of national security and, therefore, measures can be taken beyond conventional actions to guarantee access to water (Ribeiro & Sant’Anna, 2014). In such a situation, “From the moment transboundary water resources become politicized, their negotiation is led by the Ministry of Foreign Relations, and international water relations are no longer the responsibility of technical state departments such as the water, agriculture, planning and finance ministries. As a consequence, the issues and priorities on the agenda become related to sovereignty” (Ribeiro & Sant’Anna, 2014, p. 584).

The actions of the leaders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, at that stage, were undoubtedly consistent with this understanding of the existing, integrating feedback loop between the weaponisation and the securitisation process. The conditions of this process will be presented in the next part of this study.

Hydropolitical historical context of tensions and disputes in Central Asia

Central Asia, as a political and geographical area consisting of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, covers an area of 3,554,451 km⁴. However, despite favourable geopolitical conditions, including the transit nature of such a large region, the diversity of the geographical environment and potential of natural and energy resources, one of the pressing problems is limited access to water – both for consumption and industrial purposes.

Central Asian water resources come from two rivers in the region – the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, whose total inflow amounts to 96.44 km³/year (Water Yearbook: Central Asia and around the Globe, 2020). For example, the second largest river in Europe, the Danube, has an inflow potential equivalent to 200 km³/year (Mamut, 2013).



Map 1. River System in Central Asia

Source: World Bank (2023).

Historically, the origins of the hydropolitical security conditions in the Central Asian region, including the management of transboundary water resources, date back to the Cold War. During this period, the water resources of this geographical region were entirely under Moscow's control. The most extreme manifestation of this

⁴ Own elaboration based on The World Factbook (2023).

state of affairs was Nikita Khrushchev's launch of the 'Virgin Lands' campaign, the effects of which are still felt today. The programme of adaptation of Central Asian steppe and semi-desert areas for the cultivation of cotton, corn and rice (especially in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) and the use of inappropriate irrigation solutions have led to irreversible changes in the existing ecosystem and river system. The anthropogenic consequence of this process is the change in the course of rivers, the deterioration of the supply of water resources to the Central Asian countries and the contemporary ecological disaster associated with the Aral Sea and its drying up by over 80%.

After the end of the Cold War, Russian control significantly lost its effectiveness in influencing water supply issues in the Central Asian region. Moreover, since the 1990s, countries in this area have started a gradual process of moving away from barter exchange within the Central Asian Power System (CAPS)⁵, which assumed the provision of water resources from the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) in exchange for energy resources, including natural gas from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

Currently, the upstream countries (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) require additional fees for water supplies for irrigation of existing cotton and grain plantations in other countries of the Central Asian region. Additionally, the Kyrgyz and Tajik authorities are implementing new investment projects, including the construction of new dams and hydroelectric power plants. The main goal of such activities is to strive to store water resources in seasons when the water demand is relatively lower and to use the hydropower potential as a potential export commodity. In this context, as I have already emphasised above, the Rogun Dam project has caused the greatest tension in the relations between the countries of Central Asia – especially in the relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. I will refer to this topic in the next part of the article.

Rogun Dam – the importance of weaponisation in the process of water securitisation in Central Asia

The construction of a hydroelectric power plant on the Vakhsh River – which caused tension in relations between Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – began in 1976. From that point on, the work was carried out in a limited manner (only preliminary construction work was carried out) and was

⁵ Ultimately, this system collapsed in 2009 after Uzbekistan and Tajikistan withdrew from it.

finally stopped after the collapse of the USSR⁶. Design and investment work was carried out by Soviet companies, and after the end of the Cold War, by Russian enterprises. After the end of cooperation with Russian contractors, the Tajikistan authorities made efforts to acquire a new contractor. Dushanbe made the final choice in 2016 when Tajik President Emomali Rahmon started cooperating with the Italian company Salini Impregilo SpA (currently, from 2020, as Webuild SpA) (Rogun Hydropower Project, n.d.). The construction cost was then around \$3.9 billion.

The hydroelectric power plant will have six turbines with a total capacity of 3,600 MW. Once completed, it is expected to produce 17.1 TWh of electricity per year (OSHPC Barki Tojik, 2014). The power plant's first unit was put into operation in November 2018, and the second in September 2019. The investment cycle is scheduled to be completed in 2029. The dam will be the highest hydroelectric dam in the world, measuring 335 metres. Currently, the highest dam is the Nurek Dam, which is 304 metres high and is also located on the Vakhsh River in Tajikistan.

As I indicated in the first part of this scientific article, in the analysed period of 1976–2017 (especially after the collapse of the USSR), the hydropower project in question was one of the key subjects of tension in relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. On the one hand, we were dealing with the rhetoric and policy of Islam Karimov, an Uzbek politician, towards the Tajik project of building one of the largest dams in the Central Asian region (i.e., the Rogun Dam on the Vakhsh River, a tributary of the Amu Darya). The Rogun Dam was then elevated to the status of an existential threat to the extent that in 2012, Karimov issued a threat to instigate the first water war if this project and other hydropower projects (implemented by both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) were completed. Conversely, there was a national mobilisation of Tajik society spurred by the influence of the Tajik leader, Emomali Rahmon, who urged citizens to contribute public and collective financial support for the construction of the dam. This project was deemed the highest national interest and a guarantee of national security and the survival of the regime in Dushanbe. The situation significantly worsened after Uzbekistan suspended natural gas supplies to Tajikistan in April 2012. The conditions of the securitisation process through the weaponisation of the Rogun Dam and the water issue are presented in the table below.

⁶ In 1993, the dam was partially destroyed due to flooding.

Table 1. Detailed Analysis of Selected Components of the Security Language of States as Actors Securitising the Problem of the Rogun Dam

State actors	Speech acts	A manifestation of securitisation and weaponisation
Uzbekistan	Statement from the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, in Astana, Kazakhstan	Uzbek President Islam Karimov has stepped up rhetoric against Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, warning that their efforts to build hydroelectric power plants on the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers could spark a war (Lillis, 2012; see also: Nurshayeva, 2012; The Economist, 2012).
	Official speech from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, Abdulaziz Kamilov, to the United Nations General Assembly	The Rogun Dam and other infrastructure projects along the two key rivers Amu Darya and Syr Darya pose an existential challenge to ensuring peace and stability in the region (UN News, 2012).
	Interview with the Minister of Agriculture and Water Resources of Uzbekistan, Shovkat Khamraev	Dams in the upper reaches of the rivers of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan pose a threat to the security of other countries in the region, as countries such as Tajikistan (via Rogun) and Kyrgyzstan (via Kambar-Ata) can control water flows for political purposes (Khamraev, 2013).
	Statement from the Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, Rustam Azimov, as part of the Proceedings of the High-Level Meeting	The implementation of infrastructure projects such as the Rogun Dam may result in an escalation of tension and a potential armed conflict in the region (Azimov, 2014).
Tajikistan	Statement from the Permanent Representative of Tajikistan to the UN, Sirodjidin Aslov, at the UN forum	Uzbekistan's policy towards the Rogun Dam is an existential threat to Tajikistan's energy sovereignty and to the identity of becoming a fully independent and electricity-exporting country (Aslov, 2007).
	Statement from the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, at the 63 rd Session of the UN General Assembly	The Rogun Dam project is an integral element of building a new identity for Tajikistan after the collapse of the USSR (Rahmon, 2008).
	Statement from the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, at the 64 th Session of the UN General Assembly	The existential challenge is to ensure Tajiks' energy self-sufficiency and economic development (Rahmon, 2009). Tajikistan has the right to use its natural resources, including hydropower, for the benefit of its people (Zarifi, 2012).

Source: Author's own elaboration.

After President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took power in 2016, relations gradually improved and, in 2017, the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs withdrew its claims regarding the dam in question.



Picture 1. Rogun Dam in Tajikistan on the Vakhsh River

Source: *Zapora Rogun* (2023).

Conclusions

My article demonstrates the existence of a quasi-feedback loop between hydropolitics and securitisation. This connection is not only evident in the substantial overlap of conceptual and methodological approaches, as highlighted in the case study. Primarily, it arises due to the inadequate management of transboundary water resources between the countries in a specific region, in this instance, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Such mismanagement sets the stage for the escalation of tensions and a rise in the level of mutual distrust. In such a situation, potential water security problems require a response at a higher level of political-state relations and extraordinary security measures.

Moreover, this study is one of the further pieces of evidence confirming the thesis that securitisation in non-democratic and authoritarian countries is much easier to carry out.

The securitisation movement is legitimised by the regime itself, which wields power in relation to its own citizens, who are potential recipients. In this case,

‘waterisation’ is a significant factor facilitating the implementation of the assumed plan to formulate speech acts, where water gains existential significance and constitutes a weapon in mutual relations between former post-Soviet republics in Central Asia.

As the analysis shows, the securitisation activities were symbolic, and the threat itself was not real. The level and scale of the security problem have been elevated to a threat to sovereignty and national security. Decision-makers and political elites in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have constructed this threat as existential in their security agendas. However, as I indicated in the study, Uzbek claims were withdrawn in 2017 by the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This became possible after the death of Islam Karimov, with Shavkat Mirziyoyev assuming the presidency. Another factor contributing to desecuritisation was a feasibility study conducted by the World Bank, which did not identify any threats to the region. The findings of the IBRD study formed the core of Tajik rhetoric. Nevertheless, in the period under study, securitisation activities, due to the weaponisation of the water problem and perceiving it through the prism of the threat of potential war, contributed to the effective securitisation of this problem at the inter-state level and, above all, in the Central Asian region itself.

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