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# On Water, Diplomacy and Human Security

By: Dan Macfarlane

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## Reflections on Water, Climate and Humanity | Part 2

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At the turn of the last century, it was, and maybe still is, common to say that “water is the new oil.” But that is to fundamentally misunderstand water. Water is so much more than a mere commodity – though we certainly need it for trade, commerce, transportation, and energy. We need water for civilization; but we also need it to live.

Water is inextricably intertwined with not only the history of Toronto, but the bilateral Canada-US relationship. Other parts of the world are defined by liquid scarcity; we live in an area of water abundance.

Water bodies powerfully shape central Canadian conceptions of itself. Echoing aspects of University of Toronto professor Donald Creighton’s “Laurentian thesis”, Canada arguably exhibits a powerful type of “hydraulic nationalism” in which the waters of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence basin are tightly tied to Canadian history and identity. Such ideas have played a tangible role in important Canada-US negotiations and agreements.

Locally, Lake Ontario, and the Niagara and St. Lawrence Rivers, have been the canvass on which much of the bilateral Canada-US relationship has played out. Prior to the 1950s: the War of 1812; the Underground Railroad; the Boundary Waters Treaty; failed Great Lakes agreements in 1929, 1932, and 1941. Since the middle of the twentieth century: a Niagara Treaty in 1950; a St. Lawrence agreement shortly thereafter; the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreements of the 1970s; the region of the world’s largest transborder trade.





“Our security and resilience only goes as deep as that of our water.”

At the same time, those same water bodies and waterscapes have been indelibly shaped – literally – by US-Canadian transnationalism and diplomacy. Niagara Falls is a fraction of its former self, while the St. Lawrence, the second-largest river on the continent, was transformed into a hydropower reservoir. The “death” of Lake Erie in the 1960s and the many polluted rivers flowing into the Great Lakes that caught fire at this time reflected the region’s industrial transformation.

Because of its ample waters, southern Ontario is a hydro-electric superpower. The shores of Lake Ontario also host several nuclear power plants and refinement facilities – and when you think about where such facilities are placed, it is because they need water for cooling. Same thing with the many coal plants in the area.

The so-called “water-energy nexus” refers to the relationship between the water used globally for energy production. Long before Canada became the go-to source for American oil, southern Ontario was the focus of the world’s largest crossborder energy integration: electricity from falling water.

Of course, the irony of using water to produce fossil fuel-powered energy is that the resulting emissions drive climate change, which in turn has significant impacts on security – human and water.

Despite the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreements, which were pioneering pieces of global environmental transborder governance, we are now returning to many of the problems of the 1960s. And climate change is only throwing curveballs into this.

Human security is impossible without access to the right amount of clean water: too much, too little, too polluted – all are dangerous. Our security and resilience only goes as deep as that of our water.



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Dan Macfarlane is an Associate Professor in the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at Western Michigan University (Kalamazoo, MI) and a Senior Fellow in the Bill Graham Centre for Contemporary International History at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *Negotiating a River: Canada, the U.S., and the Creation of the St. Lawrence Seaway* (UBC Press, 2014), winner of the Champlain Society's Chalmers Prize for Ontario History, and *Fixing Niagara Falls: Environment, Energy, and Engineers at the World's Most Famous Waterfall* (forthcoming September 2020). Most recently, he edited an Open Access collection on the history of the Boundary Waters Treaty and the International Joint Commission, titled *The First Century of the International Joint Commission*, published in January 2020.

