

Sehring, J. and Wolf, A. 2023. Affective hydropolitics:  
Introduction to the Themed Section.  
Water Alternatives 16(3): 900-911



---

## Affective Hydropolitics: Introduction to the Themed Section

### Jenniver Sehring

Department of Water Governance, IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, Delft, The Netherlands; [j.sehring@un-ihe.org](mailto:j.sehring@un-ihe.org)

### Aaron T. Wolf

Oregon State University, Corvallis, USA; [aaron.wolf@oregonstate.edu](mailto:aaron.wolf@oregonstate.edu)

---

**ABSTRACT:** Decision-making and negotiations on transboundary waters are often presented as rational, state-led processes. In that context, 'hydropolitics' refers to the dynamics of interstate relations regarding transboundary water resources, which are analysed at length in the literature. This paper adds a discussion of the (apparently) non-rational components that are more rarely considered: how the governance of international waters is impacted by emotions, spirituality, identity, trust or personal bonds. This introduction surveys the evolution of affective hydropolitics in both academic literature and in practice and recognises that, though these components have always been present in water diplomacy, the positionality of (mostly Western) researchers has precluded their ready assessment. To showcase the multi-level relevance of affective aspects for water politics, we draw on literature from political ecology and international relations. Based on this, we outline some general propositions and (future) research questions on the role of affective aspects in hydropolitics and water diplomacy. The contributions of the themed section show the role of emotion in negotiations between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the effect of group identity among representatives of Central Asian countries when mitigating tensions in the Aral Basin. The papers in this section further offer a conceptualisation of trust and trust-building in water diplomacy processes and explore how the personal spirituality of the individuals who negotiate international waters influences their approach. We are hopeful that shining an academic light on the human, emotional (non-rational) factors affecting those engaged in hydropolitics will help deepen our understanding of these critical and complex processes.

**KEYWORDS:** Water diplomacy, water conflict, water cooperation, emotional turn, decolonial

---

### INTRODUCTION

Decision-making and negotiations on transboundary waters are often presented as rational, state-led processes; however, many practitioners engaged in water diplomacy and water conflict transformation have observed and experienced that interpersonal affective factors such as trust, emotion, or personal chemistry matter to the achievement of cooperative solutions. Researchers in hydropolitics have likewise noted that certain pathways towards water conflict or cooperation cannot be fully explained by (supposedly) rational factors such as economic benefits or costs, power asymmetries and the resulting strategic interests, or the existence of formal rules and organisations. Similarly, while there is frequent mention of people's different social, spiritual and cultural connections with water, so far little attention has been paid by scientific analysis or policy strategies to if, and how, these factors impact water politics in the transboundary realm.

Affective factors such as emotions or spiritual bonds with water do not fit into our established set of categories for framing hydropolitics. They are not easily conceptualised and operationalised with mainstream scientific methods. The dominant perspectives on hydropolitics reflect the Western bias in

the relevant academic disciplines. These have conceptualised cognition and rationality as being detached from emotion or spirituality and, in terms of problem-solving, they consider the former approach to be superior to those that are based on, for example, faith or social bonding (Tickner and Smith, 2020; Acharya and Buzan, 2017). Western philosophy and social sciences have for a long time been built on the dichotomies between thinking and feeling, mind and body, rational and spiritual, and public and private. The idea that the worlds of rationality and spirituality are separate and distinct is in fact a relatively recent phenomenon; it is common only in very specific places in the world and is a product of 18th-century Western Europe. The 'Enlightenment' – an era that combined advances in science with extreme excesses in European church politics – resulted in a conscious severance of rationality from spirituality; this held profound implications for today's hydropolitical landscape. It suggested that day-to-day considerations should be measurable and 'objective', whereas spiritual matters should be considered at home or in the course of interactions with one's Friday, Saturday, or Sunday community (Martin, 2007). Over time, 'rationality' came to dictate the structure of paradigms from economics to science to modernity.

Within this idea of rationality, emotions are considered to be embodied, private, irrational; hence not relevant when analysing the behaviour of states or relations between states. This dichotomy is also highly gendered, as Anderson and Smith (2001: 7) stress: "[The] marginalization of emotion has been part of a gender politics of research in which detachment, objectivity and rationality have been valued, and implicitly masculinized, while engagement, subjectivity, passion and desire have been devalued, and frequently feminized". The study of emotions in many disciplines has been, "silenced, belittled and undermined by both academia and in the public sphere" (Savelli, 2023: 3). It is therefore not surprising that feminist and decolonial scholars were among the first to challenge these dichotomies and to put affective aspects in the centre of analysis (see, for example, Sultana, 2011; Tickner, 1992).

Their argument is supported by insights of neuroscientific research which suggests that emotion and cognition are inseparable (for example, Phelps, 2006; Verweij et al., 2015). Hence, also political ideas, beliefs and institutions are inseparable from emotions. Just as the social sciences have increasingly recognised their inherent subjectivity and positionality, so too have the physical sciences begun to acknowledge their reliance on the perspectives, contexts and biases of the scientist.<sup>1</sup>

The articles in this themed section consider the role that emotions, spirituality, identity, and trust or personal bonds play in how we govern international waters. We use the term 'affective hydropolitics', which was coined by our colleagues Wondwosen Seide and Emanuele Fantini (This Issue) in their contribution to this themed section.

The concept of hydropolitics refers to the politics of interstate conflict and cooperation over transboundary water resources. In contrast to terms like transboundary water management, it avoids an apolitical and technocratic framing of the issues at stake and often focuses on the power relations among riparian states. Hydropolitical research draws on theories and approaches from different disciplines but has a stronger relationship with social sciences. It links what happens in the water sector with the broader political, economic and sociocultural setting (Cascão and Zeitoun, 2010; Bréthaut et al., 2021).

Building on Hutchison and Bleiker (2014: 502), we use the term 'affective' to express our understanding that, "emotion, feeling, and sensations combined generate often unconscious and unreflective affective dispositions that connect and transcend individuals". We see the affective dimension as a complex and dynamic part of any hydropolitical setting and as potentially creating both opportunities and constraints for political processes (see also Laszczkowski and Reeves, 2015). We use the term 'affective' here as a broad umbrella term and do not differentiate between affect, feeling and

---

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging the dependence of the social sciences on the subjective practitioner may in fact have been predated by a similar awareness within the natural sciences, spurred in the 1920s by Einstein's work on the theory of relativity (see, for example, Carr, 1927).

emotion.<sup>2</sup> It is important to stress that while affective aspects like emotions, trust or spirituality are subjective, internal and embodied experiences, they are also culturally coded and therefore recognisable within a group. They can be institutionalised and thus linked to structural aspects and power relations. Bringing emotions into hydro-politics is not meant to replace its other analytical categories; rather, it allows us to grasp them better. As an example, many analyses of power asymmetries in hydro-politics rely on (neo-)realist theories in international relations. While not being explicit about it, these generally assume that power asymmetries are based on and perpetuate certain emotions, especially fear. In this respect, excluding emotions from analysis risks overlooking key factors that maintain existing power relations, while including them can make their subtle workings more visible (Ling, 2014).

In our endeavour to frame affective hydro-politics, we can draw on substantive literature in several relevant disciplines. These include the so-called 'emotional turns' in international relations (Mercer, 2014; Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014), in geography (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Askins and Swanson, 2019; Bondi et al., 2006), and in political ecology (Sultana, 2011, 2015). Without any claim to completeness, we give a brief overview of the literature that inspired us and which we believe can lead to the development of conceptual and methodological approaches to studying affective hydro-politics.

### TRACING AFFECT IN WATER MANAGEMENT AND POLITICS

It is commonly understood that water is much more than an economic resource and a means of life and that it has many different cultural, religious, social and spiritual meanings and values (Strang, 2004). Scholars of especially (feminist) political ecology have turned their attention to the way in which emotions impact daily practices or perceptions of water use and management; they have particularly studied the close interrelation between embodied experiences and political and economic power.

With the case of the water crises in Bangladesh, Sultana (2011) shows that conflicts over access to safe water give rise to emotional responses that differ by gender and class. Emotions are linked to the broader social relations of power and gendered subjectivities that are reproduced in concrete water disputes. Emotions thus also affect how people act and manoeuvre in those disputes. Goldin (2010) and Egge and Ajibade (2021) similarly show how negative emotions such as fear or shame deprive marginalised communities of equitable water access. From a different perspective, Savelli (2023) portrays the emotions experienced by wealthy and privileged citizens of Cape Town during the city's water crisis; the author argues that this knowledge is important to an understanding of the complexities of current injustices and the impediments to more equitable water systems. Building on a review of the political ecology literature, Gonzáles-Hidalgo and Zografos (2020) explore the relationship between environmental conflict, power and emotion; they propose the Emotional Political Ecologies (EmPEs) multidimensional framework which stresses the dual role of emotions in environmental conflict. 'Negative' emotions include suffering or trauma that result from environmental conflicts linked to, for example, neoliberal projects and colonisation; 'positive' emotions, on the other hand, are those that trigger engagement with the environment, political action and mobilisation. Other authors have suggested to mobilize the language of 'care' (with its clear emotional connotation) instead of the 'control' for a better understanding of local water management practices and for exploring pathways towards their sustainable transformation (Domínguez-Guzmán et al., 2022; Domínguez-Guzmán et al., 2023).

These studies show the importance of affective aspects in the daily struggles that make up water politics. As Sultana states (2011: 163), they help us "to further explain and illuminate the ways that resources struggles and politics are not only economic, social, or rational choice issues, but also emotive realities that have direct bearing on how resources are accessed, used, and fought over". Affect

---

<sup>2</sup> This is subject to a wider conceptual debate among social scientists (see, for example, Mercer, 2014; Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014; Laszczkowski and Reeves, 2015); we feel, however, that such a detailed differentiation is at this point not relevant to our exploration of their role in hydro-politics.

is thus one of the factors that shape the outcomes of practices and processes of water access, use and control; these practices and processes, in turn, are experienced emotionally by the involved actors.

Spirituality, likewise, has been an integral component of water management since time immemorial, with just about every faith tradition in the world relating water to spiritual transformation (Grim and Tucker, 2014). In the modern West, water, like science more generally, took a utilitarian and quantitative turn. However, water managers increasingly recognise its religious and spiritual components (Gleick, 2023).<sup>3</sup> This reconnection is often driven by Indigenous communities, many of whom have resisted the separation of rationality and spirituality (Khayat and Jara, 2021). Today, it is becoming somewhat more common to invoke the tenets of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) to incorporate non-quantitative attributes of water into both academia (Sioui, 2022; Leonard et al., 2023) and practice (Government of New Zealand, 2017). Both the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) have active programmes in water, spirituality and faith. They support the incorporation of spiritual values into decision-making frameworks and the inclusion of religious leaders and organisations in water dialogues. Spiritual and faith aspects can therefore be considered an established sub-theme in the global water discourse (Salamé et al., 2021). The literature and practice of conflict transformation has likewise become more explicit in its spiritual aspects, whether from a secularised perspective (for example, Gopin, 2004; LeBaron, 2002), or more specifically from one or other faith tradition (Keshavjee, 2013; McConnell, 1995; Hanh, 1990).

When we look at the literature specific to hydropolitics or water diplomacy, it is rarer to find the explicit naming of spirituality or TEK. This is not surprising given what we have said about its history and preferred frameworks. One author of this paper has had the good fortune to both publish in that realm (Wolf, 2012) and work with like-minded students from different faith traditions (Porta and Wolf, 2021; Loodin and Wolf, 2022). Wolf (2012) stressed that Western/Global North ideas of rationality resulted in treating water as an economic good, an approach that was then exported to the Global South via development projects and assistance. He questioned if (water) negotiations were as rational as usually presented. He proposed an alternative path of four stages that was inspired by spiritual and faith traditions; this path moved away from interest-based water negotiations to more holistic approaches. While many glossy leaflets and policy statements claim to acknowledge Indigenous and spiritual values, they are still only minimally integrated into transboundary institutional frameworks. The contribution of Ramawadh et al. (This Issue) demonstrates the challenging nature of actually reconciling these values with the dominant rational approach and integrating them into actual water negotiations.

### **AFFECTIVE ASPECTS AT THE TRANSBOUNDARY LEVEL: BRINGING IN THE EMOTIONAL TURN OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

An important inspiration in our search for answers on the affective dimensions of hydropolitics has been the so-called emotional turn in the field of international relations (IR). Over the past two decades, an increasing number of IR scholars have become interested in the affective dynamics that shape what is often framed as rational decision-making. Emotions have long been portrayed as either irrational responses or purely personal experiences that have no relevance to public policy and international politics. In contrast, scholars like Crawford (2000), Bleiker and Hutchison (2008) and Mercer (2014) have pointed out that political ideas, beliefs and institutions are inseparable from emotions. In the end, "states are not gigantic calculating machines; they are hierarchically organized groups of emotional people" (Hymans, 2010: 462). Emotions are individual subjective feelings and spirituality is part of personal faith; they are, however, also culturally constructed. Their cultural components are manifested in the meaning

---

<sup>3</sup> We distinguish between spirituality and religion: We loosely define 'spirituality' as involving the recognition of a universal connection – however that may be understood – which is occasionally glimpsed through experiences of transcendence; we define 'religion' as a systemised form of faith and worship (see also Ramawadh et al., This Issue).

attached to them, the way they are expressed, how they are recognised, and which emotions are appropriate to be shown in a particular context and by whom. Group emotions can also evolve in the form of collectively felt trauma, anger or fear, for example after a terrorist attack or a disaster. These collective emotions are often powerful, being experienced as objective and appropriate; they can also create a strong sense of community (Hutchison, 2016; Mercer, 2014). The contribution of Wondwosen and Fantini (This Issue) includes a more elaborate discussion of the emotional turn in international relations.

Emotions can also be understood as practices, hence as competent, socially meaningful, bodily performances (Bially Mattern, 2011); this draws attention to how emotional practices shape different fields of international politics, including hydropolitics. Emotions are a political issue, and they and their expression are highly gendered, as also the above referred research in political ecology has shown. Feminist research on water diplomacy and transboundary water governance has pointed out that water negotiations also include the expression of certain emotions, like showing anger through shouting or swearing, which is highly gendered. This impacts both the potential for constructive resolution of water conflicts and the accessibility of women to the male-dominated water sphere (Sehring, 2021; Ter Horst et al., forthcoming).

Such emotional practices affect interstate relations 'behind the scenes'. There is also, however, the intentional and explicit use of emotion. State actors can use rhetoric, gestures or symbols to evoke emotions such as pride or fear in order to help them justify particular policies or strengthen nation-building. Water infrastructure lends itself as a forum for such intentional "emotional diplomacy" (Hall, 2015) or "propaganda of emotion" (Laszczkowski, 2016). Examples for this are the Roghun Dam in Tajikistan, framed by the Tajik president as, "Roghun is our all-motherland, faith, future, unity" (Suyarkulova, 2014); the Kökäräl Dam on the Aral Sea, which the Kazakh government used to create a sensation of national pride (Wheeler, 2021); or the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) Dam in Turkey (Allouche, 2020). The dispute over the Ethiopian Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD) has likewise been described by political leaders in a way that extended its significance beyond its hydropolitical implications to also incorporate the core identities of both Egypt and Ethiopia; it was framed as an "existential threat" to the former and as an "existential necessity" to the latter (Ayferam, 2023).

Speeches by political leaders are also a useful tool in the creation of emotions. Turkish presidents Demirel and Erdogan, for example, in their speeches on the Southeastern Anatolia Project, created an emotional narrative around Turkey's past sufferings and present achievements; although it evoked some negative emotions, the positive emotions the narrative triggered were able to mobilise political support (Arynova, 2021). Wolfe (2017), in contrast, analysed nine historic water speeches and found that negative emotions and mortality primes were more prevalent than positive emotions.

Social bonding and friendship between political leaders are as crucial to diplomacy as emotion. They can be genuine and thus help transform relations, even among geopolitical enemies, and/or they can be used strategically and instrumentally (Holmes and Wheeler, 2020; van Hoef and O'Connor, 2019). One example of this is the rapprochement between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan regarding the Roghun Dam, which featured the celebrated 'fraternal ties' between the two presidents (see Sehring, 2021; Dadabaev et al., This Issue). The personal relations and joint commitment of the epistemic community were also important to the success of one of the first international agreements on a transboundary aquifer, that of the Guarani aquifer system in South America (Hussein, 2018; Crystal, 2023). Dadabaev et al. (This Issue) show how in Central Asia a joint regional identity and norms of neighbourly solidarity mitigate hydropolitical conflicts. The claim to mutual solidarity and fraternal ties, however, is not unique to this region; we can witness it also in, for example, the water discourse of the South African Development Cooperation (SADC). In the Mekong Basin, policymakers have for decades referred regularly to the 'Mekong spirit' as "a combination of collective courage, statesmanship, perseverance and goodwill" (MRC, 2018) which drives water cooperation despite the political challenges in the basin.

Water diplomacy, as any diplomacy, depends on the correct assessment of others' emotions. The rationale of many water diplomacy initiatives, especially Track 2 and Track 3 approaches,<sup>4</sup> is often also an affective one. Through interpersonal interaction and exchange, such initiatives aim to develop personal bonds, joint values and beliefs; building on this, they further aim to create interpersonal and intergroup empathy and trust. Many third-party initiatives for water diplomacy are focused on building such personal relations through, for example, the organisation of joint study tours and regular meetings; they include informal components and cultivate a pleasant atmosphere. Water diplomacy, however, is not only about diplomats and state officials. Track 3 water diplomacy initiatives aim to bring water users and ordinary people together and to create bonds across borders and with the water body itself. Many basins meanwhile engage in joint 'river day celebrations' that include basin-wide cultural activities such as children's painting competitions and collaborative art projects. Little discussion of this can be found in the academic literature, but practice has moved ahead, realising the importance of creating transborder emotional bonds between people and their rivers that go beyond official state interactions.<sup>5</sup>

### UNVEILING AFFECTIVE ASPECTS IN HYDROPOLITICS AND WATER DIPLOMACY

The terms hydropolitics and water diplomacy contain components of both the science of water resources and the affective aspects of collective decision-making, although the latter may not be as clearly articulated as we would like. The growing prominence of the term water diplomacy over the past decade has drawn attention to the micro level, that is, to people and their strategies and behaviours. Attention to Track 2 and 3 initiatives shows the importance of creating comfort, trust and friendly relations; however, this has not yet translated into an acknowledgement of this conceptually in water diplomacy, which often follows an interest-based approach (Nagheeby and Amezaga, 2023). The rhetoric around negotiations tends rather to focus on zero sum or win-win scenarios, on BATNA (best alternative to a negotiated agreement), and on ZOPA (zone of possible agreement); this builds on the idea of the negotiator being a benefit-maximising individual rather than a social and emotional being.

Many faith traditions, in contrast, consider our relationship with the world around us to have four aspects: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual (Wolf, 2017). One might, in a similar way, define four lenses through which we might see water. The 'physical' components of water might be taken as agriculture, transportation, energy and basic ecosystem functioning; these involve the water we see, touch and move. There is also 'mental' water – a consideration of its efficiency or price. These 'rational' aspects of water are regularly the focus of water negotiations and are often carried out by those with technical training. But it is a truism in the conflict transformation world that, 'the issue is never the issue'. The roots of the dispute may well lie in 'emotional water' (water as it is tied to power, justice, history and sovereignty) or 'spiritual water' (water as it is tied to spiritual dimensions in most, if not all, of the world's faith traditions). For equitable, sustainable and just outcomes in water diplomacy, it behoves us to take into account all aspects of water including the affective components that are considered here.

We therefore propose three main manifestations of the connection between affect and hydropolitics:

1. Relations between states or state agencies are ultimately always relations between people, be it among high-level decisionmakers, state officials, technical experts, or ordinary citizens; they all are human beings with feelings, beliefs, values and identities. It is therefore worthwhile to look

<sup>4</sup> In diplomatic and peacebuilding processes, Track 1 refers to official governmental interaction, Track 1.5 to unofficial interaction involving state and non-state actors, Track 2 to interaction among non-governmental stakeholders, and Track 3 to people-to-people diplomacy.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the annual Danube Day (<https://www.danubeday.org/>), the Nile Day (<https://nilebasin.org/nileday/nile-day/>), the Nile Project bringing together artists and scholars (<http://nileproject.org>), the project to collect songs from the Brahmaputra (<https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/culture/brahmaputra-river-songs/#article>), or the project to collect stories and their artistic expression around the Syr Darya (<http://en.syr-darya.org/stories>).

at these personal relations and networks in order to understand how they complement formal policy processes.

2. The dominant beliefs and feelings of a group can be institutionalised through political discourses and narratives and can shape national policies and actions in a transboundary basin as, for example, policy doctrines against upstream developments responding to fear or reluctance to share water-related data due to mistrust.
3. Identities or collective emotions can affect water decisions, but water lends itself also to being part of processes to shape identity and feelings through, for example, music, photos, symbols and rituals. This can be divisive (one riparian state against another) or unifying (shared basin).

This raises important questions both for a better understanding of hydropolitics and for crafting adequate water diplomacy strategies, for example:

- How do emotions affect water policy priorities and negotiation tactics? How are water development projects affected by emotions, but also used to create emotions?
- Can the spiritual value of water and its immaterial role in many cultures and religions offer different pathways for water conflict resolution?
- Do affective bonds via shared traditions, a common history, or a joint identity make water cooperation easier?
- In conflict resolution processes, what is the role of personal ties among political leaders or negotiators?
- How do art and culture create bonds and understanding that support water cooperation? How are they used for agitation in a conflict?
- How do certain affective narratives evolve and become dominant and how do they influence water conflict or cooperation?

These questions do not yet have answers. The articles in this themed section address some of them, but they are only a starting point. The section and this introduction are part of an exploratory endeavour. Accordingly, the articles are not built on a common theoretical or conceptual basis; rather, they are bound together by a joint curiosity to understand how attention to affective aspects such as emotion, trust, spirituality and personal relations might expand our understanding of hydropolitics.

## OVERVIEW OF THE THEMED SECTION

This themed section emerged from presentations and discussions at the 4th Water and Peace Seminar of IHE Delft Institute for Water Education in 2022, which was devoted to the affective dimensions of water conflict and cooperation. To explore this relatively new topic, the workshop brought together researchers, water officials, mediators, artists and diplomats. It extended well beyond what is represented in this issue, including sessions on social bonding, art, spirituality, trust, emotions, discourses and social identity. Many inputs were not in a standard academic format – like visual presentations of artwork or personal reflections – and thus did not lend themselves to discussion in an academic journal article.

This points out one of the challenges of doing scientific research on affective aspects of political interactions. There is an often-encountered perception that they are not 'researchable', too subjective, too esoteric, and that they are at odds with what are perceived as valid and sound scientific methods, especially in a field like water that is dominated by engineering and the natural sciences. Studying emotions usually involves an interpretivist research design and qualitative methods; these again need

different evaluation and review criteria than those that are predominant in positivist epistemologies (and among many peer reviewers in water-related journals).

All articles in this themed section use qualitative interviews as either a central or a complementary method of data collection. Ramawadh et al., use interviews as the main source in their exploration of spirituality in water diplomacy. Wondwosen and Fantini and Dadabaev et al., on the other hand, use interviews to complement their analysis of policy documents, media reports and speeches, for which Wondwosen and Fantini apply the method of affective discourse analysis. The paper by Keskinen et al., is based on a literature review, but they also use a few interviews to substantiate their results. Interviews are a suitable, yet limited, method for scrutinising affective aspects that are often unconscious and taken for granted. For further research on affective hydrogeopolitics, we hope that more ethnographic, fieldwork-based research will be possible, using methods such as participant observation or shadowing. We can learn from qualitative-oriented social sciences and humanities and can benefit from more inter- and trans-disciplinary engagement.

The four papers of this collection engage with four key themes that were discussed at the Water and Peace Seminar: emotions, trust, social bonding and identity, and faith and spirituality.

Wondwosen Michago Seide and Emanuele Fantini urge analysis beyond the state-centric, high-level politics of international relations, calling for the incorporation of an understanding of emotions into negotiations, in this case between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile. They show that these negotiations are actually not only about the technical issues of filling and operating the dam and that they are ultimately also about emotions like fear of water (in)security and anger around water injustice. They suggest that successful negotiations should not avoid a consideration of these emotions; rather, they should assess them explicitly with the goal of reconciling those that stand in the way of an equitable agreement.

Similarly, Timur Dadabaev, Jenniver Sehring and Nigora Djalilova note that analysts who have focused on the hydrogeopolitics of Central Asian countries disproportionately emphasise formal relations and thus have regularly – and erroneously – predicted conflict over the waters of the Aral Basin. The authors argue for a more nuanced frame that takes note of the fact that these countries have a tradition of balancing the needs and rights of individual countries with regional relationships and responsibilities – what the authors conceptualise as the "water neighbourhood". The authors build on complex water relations that extend beyond state-centric models. They make use of regionally derived concepts that include a substantive affective dimension; this dimension is related to the (imagined) kinship ties of mutual respect and solidarity that exist among the peoples of Central Asia.

Marko Keskinen, Elina Häkkinen, Juho Haapala and Bota Sharipova focus on trust and trust-building, noting that it is one of the components of water negotiations that is most commonly acknowledged outside of the technical. Interestingly, the three aspects of trust that they examine – rational, constructivist and psychological – span the affective-scientific spectrum and show how rational and emotive aspects are interlinked. In order to get more clarity on the often-mentioned but rarely conceptualised and substantiated role of trust in water diplomacy, they identify 10 categories of potential trust-building activities that emerge from the water cooperation literature. They show that trust has a dual, or circular, role in such processes in that it is important as both a starting point and an outcome of water cooperation and needs to be constantly reinforced through water diplomacy and cooperation activities.

Sharoma Ramawadh, Diego Jara, Aaron T. Wolf and Jenniver Sehring, finally, focus at an even smaller scale, on the individuals who negotiate international waters; they examine how their personal spirituality does (or does not) influence the practice of water diplomacy. Spirituality and forms of Indigenous knowledge and practices also fall under our broad understanding of the affective, as they involve an emotional bond between humans and non-humans and have an impact on emotional states. Based on interviews with 15 practitioners, the authors distinguish between spiritual beliefs (for example, a feeling

of connection with a divine power) and spiritual practices (such as prayer or meditation). They note that these beliefs and practices are widespread within the facilitation community and they speculate that they may in some cases actually impact outcomes. They argue that these methods offer specific alternatives, or at least supplements, to the standard (again, mostly Western, 'rational') toolbox of the practitioner.

Ramawadh et al., also remind us that the 'rationality' of Western approaches does not mean that Western actors are more rational than others. Political decisionmakers do usually prefer to frame their decisions as having been taken rationally and as being 'evidence-based' and not impacted by emotions; this is a claim that researchers all too often take at face value. The emotional, however, is everywhere and what is needed is only the approaches that help unveil it. All four papers suggest that successful water diplomacy takes place well beyond the rational, technical world that some ascribe to water; they offer much deeper motivations than those of the self-interested, sovereign, monolithic entities on which much literature rests.

## CONCLUSION

For sure, affective dimensions are not the only drivers of hydropolitics. Our aim is not to replace the analysis of the material and political aspects of transboundary water politics; nor do we see the affective as a simple remedy for overcoming conflicts of interest and inequalities. However, a conventional idea of rationality that does not integrate the affective into the analysis will not help us reach a full understanding of how and why political actors make certain decisions on transboundary waters. An analysis that incorporates an appreciation of the affective components of hydropolitical interactions can help us think about avenues for more effectively reaching equitable and fair arrangements for the governance of transboundary waters. Incorporating affective aspects into the analysis will enrich and bring nuance to hydropolitical research; inevitably, however, it will also call into question some of its assumptions and foci. Nagheeby and Amezag (2023) do this in their call to decolonise water diplomacy and reframe its narrow understanding of peace and security. Including affective components also means challenging the politics of hydropolitical knowledge production and striving for more inclusive processes, both in academia and in practical water diplomacy. In this we agree with Ling (2014: 582), who stated that, "[t]aking emotions seriously involves decolonizing our minds and our world politics, away from a single hypermasculine model that banishes all that is feminine and emotional, towards a cross-cultural model of understanding that accepts multiplicities, including multiple emotional worlds". To that end small steps can be taken, including doing and learning from inter- and transdisciplinary research or shifting the focus of water diplomacy processes to Tracks 1.5, 2 and 3. Three of the four papers in this themed section have lead authors from the Global South, two of them early-career researchers; their contribution helps lead the way towards more diverse voices and perspectives on hydropolitics.

Finally, let us be aware of our own emotions when we reflect on our positionality as researchers (and teachers) of hydropolitics. Most fundamentally, is not the work of most of us driven by enthusiasm and by a strong feeling of attachment to one or several basins and their people? On a very practical note, affective dimensions – like water – ignore political, economic and sectoral boundaries and – also like water – they can be divisive and can exacerbate tensions. They also offer frameworks for bringing people together. Because the affective dimensions of hydropolitics touch all that we do and experience, they also suggest alternative languages that we can use to discuss our common future.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This themed section was made possible with the financial support of the Water and Development Partnership Programme (DUPC2) of IHE Delft, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, K. and Smith, S. J. 2001. Emotional geographies. *Transactions of the Institute of British geographers* 26(1): 7-10.
- Acharya, A. and Buzan, B. 2017. Why is there no non-western international relations theory? Ten years on. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 17(3): 341-370.
- Allouche, J. 2020. Nationalism, legitimacy and hegemony in transboundary water interactions. *Water Alternatives* 13(2): 286-301
- Arynova, A. 2021. The role of emotional narratives in fostering water nationalism. The case of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) in Turkey. MSc thesis, Oregon State University, Corvallis, United States.
- Askins, K. and Swanson, K. 2019. Holding onto emotions: A call to action in academia. *Emotion, Space and Society* 33: 100617.
- Ayferam, G. 2023. The Nile dispute: Beyond water security. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Blog Post, January 19. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88842>
- Bially Mattern, J. 2011. A practice theory of emotion for International Relations. In Adler, E. and Pouliot, V. (Eds), *International practices*, pp. 63-86. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bleiker, R. and Hutchison, E. 2008. Fear no more: Emotions and world politics. *Review of International Studies* 34(1): 115-135.
- Bondi, L.; Davidson, J. and Smith, M. 2006. *Emotional geographies*. Ashgate, England.
- Bréthaut, C.; Ezbakhe, F.; McCracken, M.; Wolf, A. and Dalton, J. 2021. Exploring discursive hydropolitics: A conceptual framework and research agenda. *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 38(3): 464-479.
- Cascão, A.E. and Zeitoun, M. 2010. Power, hegemony and critical hydropolitics. In Earle, A.; Jagerskog, A. and Ojendal, J. (Eds), *Transboundary water management: Principles and practice*, pp. 27-42. London: Earthscan.
- Carr, H.W. 1927. Science and subjectivity. *The Monist* 37(2): 317-320.
- Crawford, N.C. 2000. The passion of world politics: Propositions on emotion and emotional relationships. *International Security* 24(4): 116-156.
- Crystal, T. 2023. Affective aspects within epistemic networks of transboundary groundwater diplomacy. MSc thesis. IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, Delft, The Netherlands.
- Domínguez-Guzmán, C.; Zwartveen, M. and Kuper, M. 2023. Transformation as practice: Learning from everyday dealings with groundwater. *Water Alternatives* 16(1): 1-12
- Domínguez-Guzmán, C.; Verzijl, A.; Zwartveen, M. and Mol, A. 2022. Caring for water in Northern Peru: On fragile infrastructures and the diverse work involved in irrigation. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 5(4), 2153-2171.
- Egge, M. and Ajibade, I. 2021. A community of fear: emotion and the hydro-social cycle in East Porterville, California. *Journal of Political Ecology* 28(1): 266-285.
- Goldin, J.A. 2010. Water policy in South Africa: Trust and knowledge as obstacles to reform. *Review of Radical Political Economics* 42(2): 195-212.
- Gleick, P. 2023. *The three ages of water: Prehistoric past, imperilled present, and a hope for the future*. New York: Hachette Book Group.
- González-Hidalgo, M. and Zografos, C. 2020. Emotions, power, and environmental conflict: Expanding the 'emotional turn' in political ecology. *Progress in Human Geography* 44(2): 235-255.
- Gopin, M. 2004. *Healing the heart of conflict: Eight crucial steps to making peace with yourself and others*. Kutztown, PA: Rodale Books.
- Government of New Zealand. 2017. National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2014. Updated August 2017 to incorporate amendments from the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Amendment Order 2017 [https://environment.govt.nz/assets/Publications/Files/nps-freshwater-amended-2017\\_0.pdf](https://environment.govt.nz/assets/Publications/Files/nps-freshwater-amended-2017_0.pdf)
- Grim, J. and Tucker, M.E. 2014. *Ecology and religion*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Hall, T.H. 2015. *Emotional diplomacy: Official emotion on the international stage*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

- Hanh, T.N. 1990. *Transformation & healing: Sutra on the four establishments of mindfulness*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Holmes, M. and Wheeler, N.J. 2020. Social bonding in diplomacy. *International Theory* 12(1): 133-161.
- Hussein, H. 2018. The Guarani Aquifer System, highly present but not high profile: A hydropolitical analysis of transboundary groundwater governance. *Environmental Science & Policy* 83: 54-62.
- Hutchison, E. 2016. *Affective communities in world politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hutchison, E. and Bleiker, R. 2014. Theorizing emotions in world politics. *International Theory* 6(3): 491-514.
- Hymans, J. 2010. The arrival of psychological constructivism. *International Theory* 2(3): 461-467.
- Keshavjee, M. M. 2013. *Islam, Sharia & Alternative Dispute Resolution*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Khayat, L. and Jara, D. 2021. An insight into the cultural and spiritual value of water. <https://www.iucn.org/news/environmental-law/202104/insight-cultural-and-spiritual-value-water>
- Leonard, K.; David-Chavez, D.; Smiles, D.; Jennings, L.; 'Anolani Alegado, R.; Tsinnajinnie, L.; Manitowabi, J.; Arsenault, R.; Begay, R.L.; Kagawa-Viviani, A.; Davis, D.D.; van Uitregt, V.; Pichette, H.; Liboiron, M.; Moggridge, B.; Russo Carroll, S.; Tsosie, R.L. and Gomez, A. 2023. Water back: A review centering rematriation and Indigenous Water research sovereignty. *Water Alternatives* 16(2): 374-428
- Martin, D. 2007. The religious and the secular: Pressure points and alignments. Keynote address. Forum 2000, 8 October 2000, Prague.
- McConnell, J.A. 1995. *Mindful mediation: A handbook for Buddhist peacemakers*. Bangkok, Thailand: Buddhist Research Institute.
- Mercer, J. 2014. Feeling like a state: Social emotion and identity. *International Theory* 6(3): 515-535.
- MRC (Mekong River Commission). 2018. Media Release: Mekong River Commission Launches Website for its 3rd Summit and International Conference, Calls for Contribution and Participation, <https://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/news/mrc-launches-new-website-3rd-summit/>
- Nagheeby, M. and Amezaga, J. 2023. Decolonising water diplomacy and conflict transformation: From security-peace to equity-identity. *Water Policy* 25(8): 835-850.
- Laszczkowski, M. 2016. 'Demo version of a city': Buildings, affects, and the state in Astana. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22(1): 148-165.
- Laszczkowski, M. and Reeves, M. 2015. Introduction: Affective states – Entanglements, suspensions, suspicions. *Social Analysis* 59(4): 1-14.
- LeBaron, M. 2002. *Bridging troubled waters: Conflict resolution from the heart*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ling, L. H. 2014. Decolonizing the international: Towards multiple emotional worlds. *International Theory* 6(3): 579-583.
- Loodin, N. and Wolf, A.T. 2022. Will Islamic water management principles be included if the Helmand River Treaty is revisited? *Water* 14(67).
- Phelps, E.A. 2006. Emotion and cognition: insights from studies of the human amygdala. *Annual Review of Psychology* 57: 27-53.
- Porta, E.L. and Wolf, A.T. 2021. Intrinsic and spiritual dimensions of water at the local scale, and the disconnect with international institutions. *Sustainability* 13: 8948, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13168948>
- Salamé, L. et al., 2021. Water discourses. In Bogardi, J.J. et al. (Eds), *Handbook of water resources management: Discourses, concepts and examples*. Springer, Cham, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60147-8\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60147-8_7)
- Savelli, E. 2023. Us and them: Privileged emotions of Cape Town's urban water crisis. *Geoforum* 141: 103746.
- Sehring, J. 2021. Masculinity and water diplomacy in Central Asia. In Schmidt, M.; Steenberg, R.; Spies, M. and Alff, H. (Eds), *Beyond Post-Soviet: Layered legacies and transformations in Central Asia*, pp. 7-6. University of Augsburg: Geographica Augustana.
- Sioui, M. 2022. Introduction: The need for Indigenous knowledge-based water and drought policy in a changing world. *Current Directions in Water Research, Volume 4*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Strang, V. 2004. *The meaning of water*. Taylor and Francis.

- Sultana, F. 2011. Suffering for water, suffering from water: Emotional geographies of resource access, control and conflict. *Geoforum* 42(2): 163-172.
- Sultana, F. 2015. Emotional political ecology. In Raymond, B. (Ed), *The international handbook of political ecology*, pp. 633-645. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Suyarkulova, M. 2014. Between national idea and international conflict: The Roghun HHP as an anti-colonial endeavor, body of the nation, and national wealth. *Water History* 6(4): 367-383.
- Ter Horst, R.; Sehring, J. and Said, A. forthcoming. Gendered practices in international water negotiations. Under review.
- Tickner, A.B. and Smith, K. (Eds). 2020. *International relations from the global South: Worlds of difference*. Routledge.
- Tickner, J.A. 1992. *Gender in international relations: Feminist perspectives on achieving global security*. Columbia University Press.
- van Hoef, Y. and O'Connor, R. 2019. Sentimental utility theory: Interpreting the utilization of collective emotions by the political elite through the Erdoğan-Obama friendship. *Political Psychology* 40(6): 1217-1233.
- Verweij, M.; Senior, T.J.; Domínguez, D.J.F. and Turner, R. 2015. Emotion, rationality, and decision-making: How to link affective and social neuroscience with social theory. *Frontiers in Neurosciences* 9: 332.
- Wheeler, W. 2021. *Environment and Post-Soviet transformation in Kazakhstan's Aral Sea region: Sea changes*. UCL Press.
- Wolf, A.T. 2012. Spiritual understandings of conflict and transformation and their contribution to water dialogue. *Water Policy* 14: 73-88.
- Wolf, A.T. 2017. *The spirit of dialogue: Lessons from faith traditions in transforming conflict*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Wolfe, S.E. 2017. Fear, anger and responsibility: The emotional content of historical speeches about water and water policy. *Water History* 9 (3): 317-336.

THIS ARTICLE IS DISTRIBUTED UNDER THE TERMS OF THE CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-NONCOMMERCIAL-SHAREALIKE LICENSE WHICH PERMITS ANY NON COMMERCIAL USE, DISTRIBUTION, AND REPRODUCTION IN ANY MEDIUM, PROVIDED THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR(S) AND SOURCE ARE CREDITED. SEE [HTTPS://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY-NC-SA/3.0/FR/DEED.EN](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/fr/deed.en)

