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IS THE UNITED STATES WATER-FRIENDLY?

WATER AS A (NOT) VITAL US NATIONAL INTEREST¹

ABSTRACT

The main aim of the paper is to present the general attitude of the United States (US) to the problem of access to water. This multi-level analysis addresses a range of issues. At the beginning, it is important to highlight the inconsistent water policy in American state and federal regulations. This is due to the hypothesis proposed here – that the US has an ambivalent attitude to water internationally, which is related to the fact that the US does not have a coherent water security policy domestically. A strong statement, and more importantly a decisive action, is absent in US foreign policy concerning water, as domestic US water policy is neglected. Additionally, water in the American economy and infrastructure is another important issue. In addition to their industrial use of water, countries differ with regard to their domestic water use. The highest average water use in the world is in the United States, which leads to another linked issue – water as an environmental problem. All of these issues are of significant importance to water as a phenomenon in the foreign and security policy of states. Despite this, water is generally not considered a core US national interest.

Keywords: water diplomacy, water management, water security, the United States

¹ This article does not focus solely on drinking water. It also addresses issues such as seawater. The reason for this is the format of the article, which is a synthesis, a general outline, a sort of introduction to American water policy. As a result, there is no distinguishment here between drinking water and others. As in the Mission of Office of Water within the United States Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, at www.epa.gov, 6 September 2025.

INTRODUCTION

The years 2018-2028 have been announced by the United Nations as the international decade of water.² Water policy is an important and widely discussed topic. The problem of access to water as a source of international conflicts nowadays is clearly connected with climate policy concerns. Water is part of climate policy. Yet, water is one of the most significant, but still too often ignored, effects of climate change: *If climate change is a shark, then water is its teeth – and in simplification, water issues can be regarded as too much, too littler or too dirty.*³ Above all, water has no substitute.

Nowadays, in the age of Anthropocene, the world needs much more than just the beginnings of international water law, such as issues concerning international rivers or inland navigation. Consequences of water-related climate change include a greater risk of more extreme weather events, sea level rise and drinking water shortages. Access to water is crucial, especially in terms of demographics: the world populations is growing by around 80 million people annually, which increases freshwater demand by around 64 billion cubic metres per year. With rapid population growth, water consumption has tripled over the past 50 years. In 2030, 47% of the world's population will live in areas of high water scarcity (UNESCO). Water is a multidimensional, interdisciplinary and strategic issue. In the academic world, for example, Budapest, Geneva, Australia, Slovakia and the Netherlands are already offering studies related to water in international relations (IR), and there are already water-related study programmes in international relations in the United States.

If hegemonies in the global political system could be characterised by specific innovations and resources, then the innovations of the hegemony of the United States since 1914, according to Immanuel Wallerstein, would be the following – the scientific and IT revolution, resources and military strength, liberal international regimes, global communication, population and universalistic culture.⁴ Regarding the subject of water, to what extent can scientific progress now be seen as a tool of US foreign policy? While analysing the case study of the US, one should take into account, inter alia, the rank and prestige of scientific and research centres, as well as mechanisms of government action – especially the role of the US Department of State. The cooperation in this sphere with American allies, along with assistance provided by the United States to developing countries, is also important.

On many levels, water issues should be analysed through a global lens and, within this perspective, expectations from superpowers are greater than those from middle

² “International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development, 2018-2028,” United Nations at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/water-decade>, 6 September 2025.

³ R. van Genderen, J. Rood, “Water Diplomacy: A Niche for the Netherlands?,” *Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael*, December 2011, at www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20111200_cling_report_waterdiplomacy_rggenderen_jrood.pdf, 29 August 2025.

⁴ J. Czaputowicz, *Teorie stosunków międzynarodowych. Krytyka i systematyzacja*, Warszawa 2007, p. 204, [in:] A. Gałganek, *Zmiana w globalnym systemie międzynarodowym. Supercykle i wojna hegemoniczna*, Poznań 1992, p. 52.

powers or small powers in a variety of international relations concerns. The United States is undoubtedly a superpower in the world order; however, whether possessing more power means more responsibility remains to be seen in American water policy. There is a certain ambivalence here. Despite warnings from various agencies, including government itself, institutions and reports on the issue, water policy remains elusive as a key US national interest. Therefore, the main aim of the paper is to answer the question of the cause of the US ambivalence towards water. In order to provide an answer, two hypotheses are proposed. Firstly, the US does not have a coherent water security policy domestically. Secondly, the ambivalent U.S. attitude to water internationally is the aftermath of similar domestic problems. Furthermore, this multi-level analysis addresses a range of additional issues. Various aspects of water are mentioned as they constitute a whole water policy.

In order to verify the above hypotheses, the first part of this article is devoted to presenting the role of water in the American economy and infrastructure. Countries differ not only in their industrial water use, but also in their domestic consumption. The United States has the highest average water use in the world, leading to another interconnected issue: water as an environmental concern. In the next part, attention is focused on the most important areas of the inconsistent water policy in American state and federal regulations. A strong statement, and more importantly, decisive action is lacking in US foreign policy regarding water, as domestic water policy is often overlooked. All of these issues underscore the significant role of water as a phenomenon in the foreign and security policy of states. In the document *US Government Global Water Strategy*,⁵ we can read that: *there is a global growing water crisis that may increase disease, undermine economic growth, foster insecurity and state failure, and generally reduce the capacity of countries to advance priorities that support US national interests*. However, the American water policy in cooperation with international organisations, including the United Nations, and the collaboration of states can be assessed differently.

At the theoretical level, there is no dominant theory of international relations, but rather a multidisciplinary of approaches. The aim of this paper is to explore the ambivalent attitude of the US towards water. To address this question, several hypotheses were proposed based on theories of international relations. Firstly, it can be hypothesised that the US lacks a coherent domestic water security policy. The second hypothesis relates to American foreign water policy: the ambivalence in the US's international stance on water is a consequence of similar domestic issues. Realist theory is particularly useful in elucidating this problem. Initially, it can be explained through (defensive) realism, which expresses scepticism about the potential for progress in international politics, akin to advancements in domestic political life. Additionally, elements of liberal theory are useful as *liberalism is seen as one of the most important theories of US foreign policy and the core character of the liberal theory implies that US foreign policy had better be a vivid reflection and promotion of the liberal and democratic features of US domestic*

⁵ "US Government Global Water Strategy," 2017, at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/U.S.-Government-Global-Water-Strategy-2017.pdf>, 5 September 2025.

*institutions*⁶ Institutional and interdependence liberalism are significant because of the mechanism of intensive international cooperation, often serving to develop solutions to common problems. This theory points to a high degree of division of labour in the international economy, increasing interdependence between states,⁷ which is closely connected with global water problems. On the other hand, the neorealist perspective is useful in connection with rivalry in terms of possessing the desired position in the international sphere. More and more scholars argue that domestic policy is an important factor in shaping foreign policy. In order to verify the above hypotheses, this paper presents both the global aspect of water issues and the US water policy at home and abroad. Complementary theories – depending on a given aspect of such a broad spectrum of water policy – are regime theory and cosmopolitanism.⁸

In the paper, content analysis, historical and document analysis, as well as elements of comparative analysis, were adopted as the methods of data acquisition.⁹ The method of data collection was chosen because of the need to use a quantitative and qualitative approach. The subjects of the research are primary and secondary sources. The literature on the subject covering the general issue of water is very extensive. Reports from individual federal agencies and research centres, as well as primary sources including legal acts issued by US government institutions, are of particular value. On this basis, the text analyses the water policy of the United States. The literature on US water policy is relatively limited, largely due to the topic's current and evolving nature. The article references significant publications, such as *Water, Security, and US Foreign Policy*, edited by David Reed.¹⁰ Studies dealing with this issue are just developing and expanding, hence the use of primary sources and press publications.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WATER TO AMERICAN ECONOMIC SECURITY

K. M. Książopolski describes four related areas of economic security: financial security, energy security, raw materials security, food security and access to clean water security.¹¹ The Wilson Center indicates that water security is economic security.¹² Therefore, it

⁶ H.T.T. Nguyen, "Theories of US Foreign Policy: An Overview," *World Journal of Social Science*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2014), p. 23.

⁷ R. Jackson, G. Sørensen, *Wprowadzenie do stosunków międzynarodowych. Teorie i kierunki badawcze*, transl. by A. Czwojdrak, Kraków 2012, pp. 107-112.

⁸ M.R. Khan, "Climate Change, Adaptation, and International Relations Theory," in G. Sosa-Nunez, E. Atkins (eds), *Environment, Climate Change and International Relations*, Bristol 2016, pp. 15-17.

⁹ D. Marsh, G. Stoker (eds), *Teorie i metody w naukach politycznych*, transl. by J. Tegnerowicz, Kraków 2006, pp. 236, 239-240.

¹⁰ D. Reed, *Water, Security, and US Foreign Policy*, New York 2017.

¹¹ K.M. Książopolski, *Bezpieczeństwo ekonomiczne*, Warszawa 2011.

¹² "Water and Security in an Uncertain World," *Wilson Center*, 19 October 2016, at www.wilsoncenter.org/event/water-and-security-uncertain-world, 29 August 2025.

cannot be questioned that economic security is the US national interest. Water's connection to the economy is a crucial issue. In general, *as we get richer, we get thirstier*.¹³ However, in 2018 alone, companies reported more than US\$38 billion in financial losses due to water problems. Globally, the world's freshwater is allocated 70% to agriculture, 19% to industry and 11% to domestic uses.¹⁴ In Europe, around 40% of total water use is attributed to agriculture.¹⁵ Water scarcity in agriculture leads to production losses, which in turn results in higher food prices. In the energy sector, the lack of water for cooling leads to power cuts and causes losses for industry. Overall, it cannot be overlooked that there is no industry without water.

Given that the global situation is not without impact on U.S. economy, questions arise regarding the connection between water security and military security in the future. As well as questions concerning the connections between international and climate security or ecological safety. Another question concerns security and access to the latest technology in terms of innovative ways to address water problems. To paraphrase Woodrow Wilson, making the world water-safe therefore appears to be the US national interest.

Despite the words of California Governor Jerry Brown in 2014 that *water is not a political game* it is impossible to ignore aspects of international cooperation on water security, including environmental or ecological terrorism. Water, therefore, can be a target, a tool and a goal in conflicts.¹⁶ Dynamic social, economic and technological development increases the demand for drinking water, yet water resources are shrinking and are significantly polluted, which could potentially cause conflicts and wars. Which is why, it is valuable to present water as a component of realist theory. The perception of conflicts over water in international relations is presented by the water war thesis and realism theories. Realists warn about the upcoming "age of water", a dangerous threat to national interests. In this perspective, the extent of the threat is global and transnational, where the importance of traditional borders may cease to be of key significance. Also, water is being referred to as the "next oil", not only among IR realists. But if the threat of water wars is real – who will be the real enemies? As more and more alarming predictions appear concerning the upcoming decades, it seems "the water century" is indeed coming. World peace hinges on hydro-politics and the grand challenge is to build hydro-diplomacy.¹⁷

¹³ "Water Security: The Water-Food-Energy-Climate Nexus," *The World Economic Forum*, 2011, at https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_WI_WaterSecurity_WaterFoodEnergyClimateNexus_2011.pdf, p. 9, 5 September 2025.

¹⁴ C. Felter, K. Robinson, "Water Stress: A Global Problem that's Getting Worse," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 April 2021, at www.cfr.org/background/water-stress-global-problem-thats-getting-worse, 5 September 2025.

¹⁵ "Water use in Europe – Quantity and Quality Face Big Challenges," European Environment Agency, 30 August 2018, at www.eea.europa.eu/signals/signals-2018-content-list/articles/water-use-in-europe-2014, 29 August 2025.

¹⁶ P. Gleick et al., *The World's Water*, Washington 2008, reference to entire publication.

¹⁷ B. Lufkin, "Why 'Hydro-Politics' Will Shape the 21st Century?," *BBC Future*, 16 June 2017, at www.bbc.com/future/article/20170615-why-hydro-politics-will-shape-the-21st-century, 25 August 2025.

As the U.S. can pursue its national interests in a secure international environment, I would like to quote Marek Pietraś's assumption about the hybridity of the contemporary international order – *International relations are shaped by a number of qualitatively new phenomena that are not assigned to a specific place, while being devoid of limitations resulting from distances and boundaries. These are factors which, due to these features, cannot be limited or eliminated by the actions of a single state.*¹⁸ The dispute may “spill over” – for example, the construction of a dam on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia led to protests from Egypt and Sudan caused by water security concerns. The negotiations break down every few months and the United States tries to mediate among Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan. After another failure in negotiations, President Donald Trump said Egypt might “blow up” the construction,¹⁹ which contributed to a situation where the US stopped being regarded as a neutral arbiter. Then, President Joe Biden was distracted by Russia and Ukraine.²⁰

On the other hand, others indicate cooperation rather than the inevitable conflict between states, even in the Middle East.²¹ So while the Neo-Malthusians, for example, predict water wars in the future, other researchers consider this conclusion to be largely premature, as there is little evidence that water itself triggered war.²² Liberal theories that often emerge in water research predict cooperation where everyone benefits.²³ For example, countries struggling with water scarcity work on innovations in desalination technology without harming neighbouring countries. NATO also claims that water can lead to conflict or tension, but not war. Water wars are also sometimes presented as part of ethnic conflicts or religious wars (e.g. Israeli-Arab conflicts). Water as a scarce resource combined with high demand for it means a greater likelihood of conflict. Water conflicts in Africa and the Middle East are so far the most well-known. Mark Zeitoun, who analyses this region in the context of water, indicates that conflict and co-operation can coexist simultaneously and that people can become very nationalistic regarding water issues. According to him, water is a very social resource; perhaps it is not even a resource anymore, but rather our relationship with water instead. He also points to desalination and the problems associated with it – it is very expensive and energy-consuming, and most water used in the world is for agriculture. What is particularly

¹⁸ M. Błoch, “Zmiany klimatu jako czynnik warunkujący transformację przyszłych stosunków międzynarodowych,” *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, sectio I, vol. 43, no. 1 (2018), pp. 215-216.

¹⁹ “Trump Should Be Mediating the Dispute over the Nile Dam. Instead He is Inciting War,” *The Washington Post*, 26 October 2020, at www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trump-should-be-mediating-the-dispute-over-the-nile-dam-instead-he-is-inciting-war/2020/10/26/4747e252-17ab-11eb-aeec-b93bcc29a01b_story.html, 30 August 2025.

²⁰ D. Kamat, “How US Retreat Will Define the Nile Dam Dispute,” *Asia Times*, 25 April 2022, at <https://asiatimes.com/2022/04/how-us-retreat-will-define-the-nile-dam-dispute/>, 30 August 2025.

²¹ J.A. Cahan (ed.), *Water Security in the Middle East: Essays in Scientific and Social Cooperation*, London 2017, pp. 19-20.

²² Ibidem, p. 24.

²³ Ibidem.

important here, according to the scholar, is that desalination is a solution for drinking water, not for agricultural water. Israel is selling desalinated water, not sharing it, which is a solution only in terms of business. It is not helping the situation – when Jordanians or Palestinians buy water from Israel, they feel as though they are purchasing an item that was stolen from them.²⁴ There are also growing disputes over water in Asia.²⁵ It is clear that in many places, states face water-related tensions.

As indicated, secure world is in the United States interest. This security though increasingly depends on water, both in the context of the international order and directly within the American economy. In June 2022, a report released by the non-profit Dig Deep sounded the alarm that problems with water cost the US economy US \$8.58 billion each year,²⁶ even though almost a decade earlier other reports warned about water's critical role in the US economy.²⁷

WATER CHALLENGES IN THE UNITED STATES

The highest average water consumption in the world is in the United States. The United States (and the Netherlands) is among the largest exporters and importers of water. The total volume of international water flow is related to the re-export of imported products. Among the main factors influencing the level of water consumption are the amount of consumption related to gross national income, consumption patterns, climate and agricultural practices, i.e. efficiency in the use of water. The United States consumes 9% of the world's water resources. In absolute terms, it ranks third after India (13%) and China (12%), but considering that India accounts for a seventeenth of the global population, relatively, the US consumes the most water, largely due to the consumption of industrial goods at 32%.²⁸ Therefore, as mentioned earlier, it is visible how essential water is for the American state and economy.

In addition to their industrial use of water, countries differ with regard to their domestic use of water. In the United States, it is 200 m³/year per person, while in the Netherlands it is only 28 m³/year per person.²⁹ This difference highlights a clash in transatlantic awareness. According to the World Health Organization, each person needs 50 to 100 litres of water per day to meet their basic needs. *On average, 144 litres*

²⁴ M. Zeitoun, "Online IR Research Seminar," 13 December 2021.

²⁵ P. Borek, "Woda jako przyczyna konfliktów zbrojnych w XXI wieku," *Rozprawy Społeczne / Social Dissertations*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2018), pp. 32-37.

²⁶ L. Willingham, "Report: Lack of Water Access Costs US \$8.6B Each Year," *AP News*, 28 June 2022, at <https://apnews.com/article/health-race-and-ethnicity-economy-climate-environment-0a25965e4d6ed3a22ee9d3a0ffd25a47>, 30 August 2025.

²⁷ "Importance of Water to the US Economy," *Arizona State University*, 3 January 2014, at <https://sustainability-innovation>, 31 August 2025.

²⁸ A.Y. Hoekstra, A.K. Chapagain, *Globalization of Water: Sharing the Planet's Freshwater Resources*, Oxford 2008, pp. 55, 59.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

*of water per person per day is supplied to households in Europe.*³⁰ More recent studies indicate that the average American uses about 340 litres of water per day, and this is counted as consumption only at home, without taking into account the food consumed. Every day in the United States, consumers throw away food, wasting both food and water. When food is thrown away, all the water and energy used to produce it is also wasted. Yet, *even in the drought, America is leaking water.*³¹ In general, for a very long time, it was believed in the United States that the abundance of natural resources would never end.

With the end of the Cold War, when the United States was able to use its efforts to combat communism in other areas, and when technological progress led to an intensification of globalization processes, it seems, though, that awareness and attitudes towards water are heading in the right direction, as 60% of Americans are in favour of paying more to invest in water infrastructure.³² More and more voices raise the importance of supporting new technologies and promoting behaviours, raising awareness, educating and strengthening involvement in the USA, like for example former US Vice President Al Gore and the GLOBE programme initiated by him. When it comes to securing the future of planet Earth, scientific progress is related to the goals of the US in its approach to ecology and energy security. As part of the GLOBE global observation and educational research programme schools from around the world cooperate in collecting environmental data, which then enables its use by scientists and other researchers. The role of the state in environmental protection policy is changing under the influence of globalisation processes. In the case of the United States, the public is becoming better informed and can indirectly influence legislation through various mechanisms. The Clean Water Act, which is discussed in more detail later, was among the first laws related to making US industry financially responsible for environmental issues.

Then in 2014, the following list of selected key water challenges in the United States was created: 1) The United States is experiencing serious but not unprecedented drought conditions; 2) Many of America's Western states are consistently vulnerable to drought; 3) Population growth is highest in America's driest states; 4) Half of water withdrawals in the United States are used for power generation; 5) Eighty per cent of California's freshwater withdrawals go to agriculture; 6) Water is a crucial input for a wide variety of American industries, not just agriculture.³³ Over time, some of these problems have become more severe.

³⁰ "Water Use in Europe..."

³¹ J. Wells, "Even in The Drought, America is Leaking Water," *Consumer News and Business Channel*, 20 August 2015, at <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/08/20/even-in-the-drought-america-is-leaking-water.html>, 30 August 2025.

³² "2024 Value of Water Index," *US Water Alliance*, pp. 1-2, at <https://uswateralliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/VOW-Poll-2024-fact-sheet.pdf>, 5 September 2025.

³³ M.S. Kearney et al., "In Times of Drought: Nine Economic Facts about Water in the United States," *Brookings*, 20 October 2014, at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/in-times-of-drought-nine-economic-facts-about-water-in-the-united-states/>, 30 August 2025.

Climate change and water cycles are closely linked (having a major effect across the US).³⁴ Natural hazards include droughts, frosts, floods, fires, winds, earthquakes, avalanches and rainfall. In the US, Mississippi is particularly exposed to floods, as seen in 1993 and 2008, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. On the other hand, for example, the Rio Grande basin is threatened with water shortages. Overall, there is growing water demand. The southwestern states are already experiencing problems. The US faces a water crisis as global heating increases the strain on supplies; ‘The Guardian’ points out that New Mexico tops the list.³⁵ *The water wars that defined the American West are heading East – interstate battles over water supplies, long a part of life in the American West, are spreading East.*³⁶ We could read in *Foreign Policy* in 2020 that *the water war on the US-Mexico border has just begun.*³⁷ Additionally, climate change and decreasing water availability are evident in the Colorado basins. And these are just a few examples. It should therefore be emphasized here that both the importance of water and the challenges associated with it are increasing in the United States.

It is commonly believed that American values include, among others, keeping an open mind and supporting innovation and entrepreneurship. Respect for science is a very American feature. Issues such as budget, universities and risk-taking are helpful to American scientific progress. If there is no risk, there is no innovation. Does politics understand innovation? Often, discoveries become a source of international competition. On the other hand, maybe care for the environment will become a priority in IR. It is a process of evolution in politics, even if scientists are calling for a revolution. One could say, somewhat grandly, that water challenges generate a need for the American spirit. However, it should be noted that these challenges are not related to values, such as those recognized by the current administration in the White House – for example, whether promoting democracy is the responsibility of the US. But they are related to the national interest.

From the global perspective, the common interest is to keep the planet Earth in the best condition possible, which is not a one-off action but a process. American authorities are increasingly involved in green endeavours, as are American companies that commit to major ecosystem measures. Yet *in recent years, the United States has lagged behind the European Union in its ratification and implementation of major multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs).* This can, however, be explained by domestic politics – *such as a desire to protect US sovereignty from the perceived threat of global*

³⁴ A. Burke, “10 Facts about Water Policy...”

³⁵ E. Holden, “US States Face Water Crisis as Global Heating Increases Strain on Supplies,” *The Guardian*, 6 August 2019, at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/aug/06/us-states-water-stress-new-mexico-california-arizona-colorado>, 5 September 2025.

³⁶ J. Newman, “The Water Wars that Defined the American West are Heading East,” *Wall Street Journal*, 2 December 2019, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-water-wars-that-defined-the-american-west-are-heading-east-11575315318>, 30 August 2025.

³⁷ A. Mackinnon, “The Water War on the US-Mexico Border Has Just Begun,” *Foreign Policy*, 19 October 2020, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/19/water-war-us-mexico-border-just-begun-chihuahua-boquilla-dam-farmers-drought>, 30 August 2025.

governance”.³⁸ After the end of the Cold War, this tendency could also be observed in some human rights international projects or in International Criminal Court cases. Expectations towards the US as a superpower are greater in this matter.

The Kyoto Protocol case can be used as an example. At the time, future Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice criticised President Clinton’s administration during George W. Bush’s election campaign for its emission limits on the so-called “greenhouse gases”. *The priority should be the national interest, not the illusory interest of the international community*. Bill Clinton chose not to submit the ratification protocol to the Senate. After gaining the office of president, Bush announced the rejection of the protocol by the United States, explaining it by the non-accession of India or China, which, as developing countries, are largely responsible for emissions of harmful substances. During Joe Biden’s presidency there were some questions whether ‘America First’ would return to ‘Climate First’ as announced by Barack Obama. In rhetoric, perhaps yes, but in practice, there are always more important matters in international affairs, and Biden ended his presidency with one term.

In general, there is greater emphasis on climate issues, and therefore water, in Europe than in the US. Yet, a great inspiration for Europe, paradoxically smaller for the United States, is also an analysis presented by the American Society of Civil Engineers in which two different future scenarios are outlined. The first warns about the continuation of current underinvestment in water – businesses will become less competitive, household costs will increase, GDP will shrink, and public health may be at greater risk. However, if the United States acts boldly and closes the water infrastructure investment gap, it will boost economic recovery, create jobs, fuel business activity across a wide range of sectors, improve public health and protect the environment.³⁹ Though the analysis was widely commented on, the American Jobs Plan from March 2021, while mentioning the plans to eliminate all lead pipes, generally placed water as a low priority.⁴⁰ Vice President Kamala Harris’s (a Californian) statement on 1 June 2022 was a positive sign. At the Global Water Security White House Action Plan Event, she stated that *Water is our most precious resource. Our Action Plan on Global Water Security will cement America’s role as a leader on water security issues*.⁴¹

‘The Guardian’ and America’s water crisis inspired a series on the challenges many in the US face, such as access to safe, clean, affordable water and the injustices to those

³⁸ D. Kelemen, T. Knievel, “The United States, the European Union, and International Environmental Law: The Domestic Dimensions of Green Diplomacy,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2015), p. 965.

³⁹ “Value of Water Releases National Poll...”

⁴⁰ “Fact Sheet: The American Jobs Plan,” *The White House*, 31 March 2021, at <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/fact-sheet-the-american-jobs-plan>, 5 September 2025.

⁴¹ “Remarks by the Vice President at the Global Water Security White House Action Plan Event,” *The White House*, 1 June 2022, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/06/01/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-at-global-water-security-white-house-action-plan-event>, 5 September 2025.

most at risk.⁴² Despite concerns over water safety and infrastructure, Americans have greater access to clean water than most people around the globe.⁴³ This may be a partial explanation of underestimation of the water challenges.

WATER IN FEDERAL AND STATE REGULATIONS

The United States is large and diverse, which is one of the reasons why it is a federal state. However, often the importance of water and various water challenges, including those related to climate, do not recognize or respect state boundaries. Water policy in American federal and state regulations is therefore an important part of a multi-level analysis. In this context, the main question concerns the apparent lack of coherent water policy in the United States across all “categories” of water, despite the importance and water challenges outlined above. For instance:

*This situation creates gaps and contributes to overlapping management competencies. The literature on the subject indicates that currently the management of marine protected areas in the United States is decentralised, divergent and subject to different legal regulations within the remit of various separate agencies, such as federal agencies, state governments and non-governmental organisations.*⁴⁴

*The challenges the United States is facing in the field of maritime governance are primarily the separation of management between federal and state-level entities.*⁴⁵

This concerns all areas of water policy. In different areas of the water subject, for instance, in states such as Utah and Washington, collecting rainwater that runs off a roof is illegal unless the person collecting it also owns the water rights in the area. In contrast, New Mexico and Arizona have developed regulations to encourage the accumulation of rainwater, as it serves as a means to conserve groundwater and surface water.⁴⁶ Additionally, states may have varying levels of water priority. The Constitution of the State of Hawaii, from 1950, in Section 7 (‘Water Resources’), indicates that the State has an obligation to protect, control and regulate the use of Hawaii’s water resources for the benefit of its people. Another example is California, which specifies in the California Public Utilities Code from 1993, Section 739.8: a) Access to an adequate supply of safe water is a basic necessity of human life and shall be made available to all residents of California at an affordable cost; b) The commission shall consider and may implement programmes to provide rate relief for low-income ratepayers; c) The commission shall consider and may implement programmes to assist low-income ratepayers

⁴² “America’s Water Crises,” *The Guardian*, 2020-2022, at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/series/americas-water-crisis>, 5 September 2025.

⁴³ A. Burke, “10 Facts about Water Policy...”

⁴⁴ D. Pyć, “Morskie obszary chronione USA a doktryna zaufania publicznego,” *Prawo Morskie*, no. 25 (2009), pp. 196-197.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 196.

⁴⁶ F. Sultana, A. Loftus, *Prawo do wody w perspektywie politycznej, gospodarczej i społecznej*, Warszawa 2012, p. 209.

in order to provide appropriate incentives and capabilities to achieve water conservation goals; d) In establishing the feasibility of rate relief and conservation incentives for low-income ratepayers, the commission may take into account variations in water needs caused by geography, climate and the ability of communities to support these programmes. There are also a number of private initiatives and collaborations across the United States at all levels. It is impossible to analyze in detail all examples of differences water policies in individual US states here. Such a comparison could constitute a separate article.

At the national level water issues can be found in the work of the Department of State unit related to scientific progress, mainly the Under Secretary for Economic Growth, Energy and Environment. Its bureaus and offices, among others, deal with ocean and polar affairs, protection of the marine environment, environmental quality and cross-border problems, water resources, international health and biodegradation, scientific and technological cooperation, as well as space and advanced technology.

The most important federal water management agency is the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). Among others, they include the US Environmental Protection Agency, which enforces regulations on clean water and promotes innovations in the water sector, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which prepares for and responds to water disasters, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the San Francisco Bay Water Quality Improvement Fund, the US Bureau of Land Management, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the US Forest Service and the US Geological Survey. Yet, American water infrastructure is ageing, deteriorating and underinvested. *Federal investment is lagging, placing added pressure on local and state governments.*⁴⁷

Facts about water policy and infrastructure in the US are not optimistic. Despite the fact that water plays a critical role in the economy (“water means business”), which was discussed earlier, the federal government accounts for only a small share of total public spending on water infrastructure. Geographic and political boundaries can pose challenges to water investment, and the cost of water is on the rise in many cities. There is also a mismatch between the demand for water investment and institutional capacity. Only a handful of drinking water utilities in the nation’s largest cities rank highly in water investment. Furthermore, the private sector owns most of the nation’s dams, and as much as 69% of the nation’s dams were built before 1970.⁴⁸

Even though the official United States Environmental Protection Agency website concerning regulatory and guidance information on water – drinking water, ground water, ocean and coastal waters, surface water (lakes, rivers and streams), stormwater, wastewater and more – has developed significantly in recent years, besides the federal Clean Water Act from 1972 and the Safe Drinking Water Act from 1974, the rest

⁴⁷ “The Economic Benefits of Investing in Water Infrastructure: How a Failure to Act Would Affect the US Economy Recovery,” *American Society of Civil Engineers*, p. 9, at <https://infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Failure-to-Act-Water-Wastewater-2020-Final.pdf>, 5 September 2025.

⁴⁸ A. Burke, “10 Facts about Water Policy and Infrastructure in the US,” *Brookings*, 21 March 2017, at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/10-facts-about-water-policy-and-infrastructure-in-the-us/>, 29 August 2025.

remains in the realm of projects (United States Environmental Protection Agency, n.d.). Even the famous Clean Water Act, despite its ambitious objectives, is regarded as ineffective in many areas.

Perhaps U.S. water policy in general would be better regarded if it were less chaotic and more coherent. Water does not necessarily have to change American federalism, but given its importance, it should be a matter of national interest, not just a matter for individual states. As long as it is denied that it is time to act, and water is not prioritized, not regarded as a key national interest, there will be a lack of effective water management and governance in the United States.

It has been pointed out earlier that both the importance of water and water challenges are increasing in the United States, but are actions also being increased? Managing the problem at various levels of the political system is characteristic of the United States and does not only apply to water – the criterion for ‘selecting’ the level of authority is effectiveness and adequacy. Perhaps, given the specific nature of the water problem and its growing importance for U.S. foreign policy and international policy, initiatives should be taken at the federal level. Like most environmental problems, the water problem is transboundary and interdependent, and therefore requires coordination at the highest level.

WATER AND US FOREIGN POLICY

Due to its politicization, we may observe ‘water leadership’ in the future as water raises a very important issue from the point of view of international relations. As indicated, water has not only humanitarian importance, but also strategic importance and should be taken into account in the foreign policies of individual countries and international politics. Combined with the observed growth in the world’s population, the importance of water is increasing. It is becoming a variable in international relations, and perhaps also an attribute of superpower status, which should be of particular importance for the United States.

The influence of the pandemic on transboundary water relations is yet to be researched. Before the pandemic water policy plans were ambitious, especially with emphasis on low-income urban areas which are the most vulnerable. With growing importance and water challenges the shape of the architecture of water safety today and the role of institutions is crucial. This is certainly a key issue for the United Nations. In 2010, a resolution of the General Assembly recognised the right to safe, clean water and sanitation as a human right. What is the situation in the US and outside the US after a decade? In 2020, the UN report *Water and Climate Change*, Chapter 2 ‘International Policy Frameworks’, described the gaps between climate change and water in international policies. It suggested parallel actions instead of integrated actions.⁴⁹ The years 2018-2028 have been announced by the UN as the international decade of water and a key role in the process

⁴⁹ “The United Nations World Water Development Report: Water and Climate Change,” *UNESCO*, 2020, at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3892703?v=pdf>, 5 September 2025.

of sustainable development. In the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Goal 6 is to ensure access to water and sanitation for all through the sustainable management of water resources and Goal 14 is to protect the oceans, seas and marine resources and use them in a sustainable way.⁵⁰ But are there really institutions capable of acting? Every two minutes a child dies from a water-related disease.

As part of cooperation with the UN and other international organisations in the international decade of water, the USA is not among the 43 countries indicated by the UN as already cooperating and committing to act under this agenda (these include Afghanistan, Andorra, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Cape Verde, Canada, China, Cyprus, Egypt, El Salvador, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Malta, Mongolia, Namibia, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Paraguay, the Philippines, Romania, Singapore, Slovenia, South Africa, Tajikistan, Thailand, Russia, Vietnam and the United Arab Emirates).

What can the role of the United States be? To what extent is China, American peer competitor, able to assume responsibility for the global situation in the field of climate protection⁵¹? What is the role of the middle powers? What is the alliance and partnership of the USA and Europe to look like? In conclusion of the US–EU summit in June 2021, climate change was identified as an area for constructive engagement with China and the establishment of the US–EU High-Level Climate Action Group was announced. *US–European commercial and security interests and green ambitions overlap with several national sustainable development strategies throughout the MENA region. So too do China's.*⁵² Currently, US interests are under increasing pressure from water scarcity, extreme weather events and water-related ecological changes in key geographic areas of strategic importance to the United States.⁵³ Already in 2012, the US National Intelligence warned that overuse of water in many places in the world was a source of conflict that could jeopardise American national security – in other words, water problems in states will distract them from working with the United States.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," *United Nations*, 2015, at <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>, 5 September 2025.

⁵¹ According to some alarmed water defenders, the American involvement in confronting China and other powers in the past led to the sacrifice of (not only American) nature. According to them, the US commits crimes against nature by poisoning the Pacific – an issue that has persisted since World War II. That is what militarism, especially the navy, is doing to water – contaminating it. There are many examples: Hawaii, Guam, with 28% of land under DOD control and having been a battlefield in WWII and a central launching pad for the war in Vietnam in particular – now facing the alarming chemical footprint of the military there; the Philippines – also with a heavy US military footprint; Okinawa – with leaks of contaminated water from the US military there; as well as Jeju with an American navy base – referred to as the crimes of US imperial strategy. "Water is Life: A Webinar on Choosing Water Over War," by *World Beyond War*, 20 February 20.

⁵² J. Calabrese, "Transatlantic Climate Action in the Gulf and Great-Power Competition," *Middle East Institute*, 27 July 2021, at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/all-about-china>, 5 September 2025.

⁵³ D. Reed, *Water, Security, and US Foreign Policy*, New York 2017, reference to entire publication.

⁵⁴ "Global Water Security," *US National Intelligence Council*, 2 February 2012, at https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Special%20Report_ICA%20Global%20Water%20Security.pdf, 5 September 2025.

With President Donald Trump's first administration, criticism emerged regarding the policy of the White House and the competence of the president's scientific advisers. Trump himself denied the existence of global warming, calling it a "hoax". His advisers were controversial. The term "War on Science" appeared, emerging after the exclusion of scientists from political decisions, fewer scientific and advisory panels and budget cuts. But the same Donald Trump, who denied climate change, stated in an official document that *Water may be the most important issue we face for the next generation*⁵⁵; and: *There is a growing global water crisis that may increase disease, undermine economic growth, foster insecurity and state failure and generally reduce the capacity of countries to advance priorities that support US national interests.*⁵⁶ The document provided a framework for the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) vision for a water-secure world: the USAID Water and Development Plan with strategic priority countries – Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Nepal, Senegal, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.⁵⁷

Science and technology agreements are tools of science and diplomacy. The advice of scientists and engineers can contribute to global development and peace. These are global issues that the politicians of individual countries cannot tackle alone. In August 2020, the US Department of State and International Transboundary Water Cooperation offered almost a million dollars for a grant on improving coordination and cooperation over shared waters in regions where water is, or may become, a source of conflict. A grant of up to US\$950,000 will be awarded for a multi-donor partnership mechanism to support cooperation on shared waters. Eligibility extends to American and foreign non-profit organisations, institutions of higher education and public international organisations.

The American government, in particular, wants to understand how the new threats may affect national security and the security of allies around the world. Local insecurity can lead to spillover to neighbouring states through migration, the spread of conflict across borders or disease, triggering US national security concerns. This is particularly true when the states involved are strategically crucial to the United States – for instance, because they provide important raw materials, are located along vital sea lanes, are important to the global economy or coincide with active US military operations.⁵⁸ The US is not blind but not sufficiently mobilised. Tensions over water are undesirable.⁵⁹

But at the same time, next to the above words, US policy seems to be oblivious to water concerns. It is valuable to examine the risks associated with water viewed in the context of the security dilemma and its implications for global governance. The latter,

⁵⁵ "US Government Global Water Strategy..."

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

⁵⁸ J.W. Busby, "Water and U.S. National Security," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 2017, at <https://www.cfr.org/report/water-and-us-national-security>, 5 September 2025.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

in particular, should encourage the US to incorporate water into its policy, develop and implement a coherent strategy in this area, and build both hard and soft power. As indicated above, water has always been important to the American economy, but as the water challenges increase, water policy should be recognized as a crucial element of US domestic and foreign policy. Indeed, this is becoming apparent on the declarative level, rather than actual US actions.

CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration the analysis conducted in the previous parts of the article, it should be stated that the attitude of the United States towards water is characterized by ambivalence not only in domestic policy but also at the international level. This is due to the transfer of domestic policy to the international arena. In addition, all of the selected water-related issues indicate that water should be a vital interest of the US, yet despite its importance, it is not (still).

To clarify the question about US water policy, regarding water and drinking water as well, it was essential to present not only the American perspective as the topic is one of the key issues for climate policy, but also the global aspect. Establishing domestic and abroad water relations is essential to signalling the American perspective on water in international relations. In conclusion, connections between what is internal and what occurs around the globe, especially with countries important to the US, indicate that the US is facing a clash of perspectives on water policy or even a denial; although threats concerning water issues at home and abroad are perceived, American actions are still only reactions. Theirs is a water tactic, not a water strategy.

As indicated, this is evidenced by American water policy in federal, state and local regulations, which to a large extent is too chaotic, even as some states are facing increasingly serious problems with water or lack thereof. The same applies to water in the economy and domestic use. It is not appreciated until it is gone. It is impossible to deny the indissolubility of water with climate change, which increasingly threatens the well-being of the United States, but also its national interest. The definition of US national interest is so often repeated that it may seem that it is the interest of everyone, not just the US – but in this case we can certainly agree that we are all connected through water.

Water issues do not appear on the front pages of newspapers. This is not breaking news. Nevertheless, with the possibility of potential future water conflicts or even a global water crisis, the United States as a superpower must build and strengthen its water diplomacy. Building more freedom in the international water market seems, however, impossible without improving water policy in the US itself. Like leaking water, we could observe America's waning attention – even in the face of alarming reports. Despite this, there are also signs that things will start moving in the right direction, and the United States will become water friendly and water will become the vital US national interest.

This case study shows that the best explanation of the US view of water in international relations is what is known as analytical eclecticism⁶⁰ – that is, combining different theories to explain international reality.

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⁶⁰ P.K. Frankowski, “Pragmatycznie i eklektycznie o stosunkach międzynarodowych,” *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, sectio K, vol. 20, no. 2 (2013), pp. 7-27.

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