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***Resolving Disputes over Natural Resources in Disputed Areas***

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*“The challenges associated with preventing, managing and resolving natural resource-induced conflicts may well come to define global peace and security in the 21st century.”*

Disputes over land and water are as old as civilization itself. But today, when resources are getting scarcer and weapons are getting more powerful, resolving disputes before they escalate is of the utmost importance to the regional and international community. Disputes over water and natural resources are emerging as a major force behind armed conflict war. On the Disarmament and Security Committee, it is United Nation’s responsibility to ensure that peace is maintained and conflict averted both through preventative and remedial methods. There are plenty of issues going on today that you need to tackle within this topic, but the United Nations’ highest goal is to make sure that issues don’t arise in the first place.

When it comes to disputes over natural resources, be aware of all the parties and motivating factors involved. Are disputes arising due to necessity of a poor nation, an unruly group of non-governmental actors, or exploitation of a resource by an aggressor? The United Nations tries to solve issues by creating consensus solutions, appealing to all parties to a conflict, avoiding zero-sum games with losers, who will block cooperation. Especially when dealing with conflicts involving large and powerful countries like China, Egypt, Ethiopia and Turkey, consensus—even if it means agreement is difficult—is highly preferable to violence. The committee must find ways to ensure that as conflicts arise, no group involved loses or gains too much, or else future conflicts may arise.

**Recent History of Natural Resources and Disputed Areas**

Natural resources are vital to every state’s economy. Most natural resources operate in one (or multiple) of three ways for an economy: energy, basic needs, and monetary benefit. Energy resources include crude oil, coal, and lumber. The Middle East is a hotbed for disputes over oil resources, but they are occurring all over the world, from Asia between the Philippines and Chinese to Argentina.

Natural resources for basic needs include land and water that are fertile for food production and drinking, lumber for cooking food and building, etc. Water is an especially contentious resource because there is so little clean water in the world relative to the growing populations in certain regions, and the expense of creating clean water systems. Many Least Developed Countries and billions of people worldwide do not have access to water with good sanitation.

Natural resources that have monetary benefits are pretty self-explanatory. The diamond mines in Africa are examples of these types of conflicts. Note that they can also fall under the latter two categories. Any resource that a state has a surplus of automatically becomes an economic benefit if the state is able to export it.

Below are several of the best known resource conflicts from around the world that illuminate how natural resources can affect long-lasting disputes over land. This is not an exhaustive list. More will be discussed in the sections about the United Nations' resolutions, and you should do your own research to learn about others as well.

#### *Ethiopia-Egypt*

The two most populous countries of East Africa share on the world's longest river, the Nile. Damming the Nile for electricity and irrigation reduces the flow downstream and gives upstream countries, especially Ethiopia, a source of power over downstream Egypt and Sudan. International assistance is facilitating Ethiopian dam building, which will benefit millions of Ethiopians, and a massive aid project by Saudi Arabia is providing assistance to offset the effects in Egypt. Egypt has demanded that the dam building stop. Relations between the capital cities of Cairo and Addis Ababa remain cordial, but tensions have been rising over the issue. Both sides have been competing for the support of Sudan on the issue, but have little to offer.



Satellite image of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in 2012.

#### *Israel-Palestine*

Access to water is an especially difficult issue for Israel and Palestine. The primary source of fresh water in the region is the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberius, Kinneret, or Gennesaret) and the Jordan River system. This already is highly stressed; after diversion for irrigation and human use,

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virtually none of the water from the Jordan River reaches the Dead Sea, which has been shrinking rapidly and is expected to dry away completely in coming years.

Palestinians accuse Israel of diverting water illegally for large reservoirs, which Israel claims are for emergency situations. Israel, long a champion of scientific water management, relies extensively on irrigation of 'gray water', the used run-off from city sewage systems. Palestine and Jordan depend on Jordan River water for virtually all of their agriculture.

According to Shawan Jabarin, Director of the Palestinian human rights organization Al-Haq, Israel also uses illegal claims on Palestinian land and sea to control gas reserves it is developing in the Mediterranean Sea, reserves that should help the economy of the Palestinian territories. Israel also uses security justifications to prevent Palestinians in Gaza from fishing or any other economic activity involving the Mediterranean.



*China's Nine Dash Line and surrounding countries of Southeast Asia:  
Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam*

### *South China Sea*

The South China Sea is another long-standing dispute where natural resources are making the conflict more contentious. This body of water could possibly hold oil and gas, and is also a very good shipping route. Countries that lay claim to parts of the Sea are Brunei, China, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. China has been raising pressure by demanding control of the nautical region defined by its Nine-Dash Line, a map outlining a region of international water which China expects to control; much the way the United States long used the Monroe Doctrine to justify a right to intervene in the affairs of Latin American states.

The Vietnamese and India have recently come together with an agreement to explore the South China Sea for oil, which made China, who also has a platform that is backed by investors from Western countries including Australia and the U.S., especially angry. The Philippines and China have also had a few military confrontations in the South China Sea, although no violence occurred.



Searching for grazing land in South Sudan

### *South Sudan*

Although it has been an independent state only since 2011, South Sudan already has become the scene for continuous fighting between ethnic groups and tribes for control of key territory. The worst catalyst for conflict often is competition for grazing rights. Nomadic pastoralists from the Dinka, Nuer and other tribes, are growing in population, bring ever larger cow herds, and demanding ever greater access to grazing land and water.

Although South Sudan is a large country, finite resources and growing human and animal populations stress the environment and create pressure that routinely escalates into armed violence. During the long civil war with Sudan, which culminated in the independence of South Sudan, tribal pastoralists acquired large arsenals. Disputes that used to deteriorate into fist-fights now can become mass shootings. With tensions great and the risk enormous, the government in Juba must intervene to maintain the peace, a task it lacks the ability to do well.

*Turkey, Iraq and Syria*

Dam building on the headwaters of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers has been a source of serious tensions between the governments of downstream Syria and Iraq. In 1994, an agreement between Syria and Turkey was registered at the United Nations to guarantee a minimum share of the water from the Euphrates to Iraq and Syria, but this has not been respected. Previous fears that Turkish dam building might cause violence have been displaced by the disintegration of both Iraq and Syria in the face of rebel groups, especially the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

But the rebels have been quick to take up the issue from the governments they displaced, making the fair distribution of waters a central demand of their own. The water access issue now blocks cooperation between governments, making it even harder for the three governments to cooperate on the problem, and raising the possibility the rebel groups will seek control of the dams or try to destroy them.



Disputed islands, claimed by China, Japan and Taiwan

**What has the UN done already?**

In 1995, the United Nations created the United Nations Interagency Framework Team for Coordination on Preventive Action. The Framework Team is a group of agencies around the

world, such as OCHA and UNESCO, who come together to create preventative ideas for conflicts where they may arise. According to their website, this Framework Team:

“While assistance is tailored to each situation, initiatives under the Framework Team and Joint Programme focuses on early engagement on potentially violent tensions, before violent conflict emerges or re-emerges. Countries that have received varying levels of support from the programme for national initiatives toward conflict prevention or the management of national stress or tensions, include: Guyana, Ecuador, Mauritania, the Maldives, The Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Lesotho, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Yemen, and Fiji.”

More recently, the UN Framework Team has joined together with the European Union in order to enhance the ability to aid countries around the world in natural resource management. This partnership seeks to accomplish three main goals:

- Reconciling interests of extractive industries, local authorities and local communities through systematic dialogue and participation of all actors in land and NRM.
- Preventing forced displacement, tensions and violent conflict around land and natural resources through improved capacities for: conflict resolution; security of land tenure; local development; benefit-sharing; transparency and harmonization; and alignment of national policies with international standards.
- Assuring that the population benefits from and has access to natural resources.

The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) is also deeply involved in promoting better use of natural resources inside countries in order to assure that those countries don't need to reach outwards for them. They work on these goals through policy creation and field work.

### **Role of the United Nations today**

Natural resource and disputed area conflicts are ever-evolving as countries grow and technology progresses. New natural resources are also always being found, leading to completely unpredictable circumstances. For instance, it was recently discovered that Afghanistan could have one trillion dollars' worth of minerals. It's difficult to tell which countries are sitting on new resources; and how that will affect their relations with the region. DISEC is needed to create resolutions that are able to prescribe solutions to conflicts that are currently occurring, such as conflicts in the South China Sea and Kurdish territory, and find ways to ensure that these issues don't happen in the first place.

Creating a plan or suggestions for ad hoc task forces in order to assess security and armament situations could be a beneficial use of DISEC resources. Creating ways to ensure that countries with disputed resources don't become heavily armed warring countries with disputed resources. Just don't forget that international cooperation is necessary for any of these plans to succeed. You never want just one region trying to control finances or personnel.

**The United Nations also can consider:**

- Establishing monitoring missions to watch disputes resources and report to the United Nations on potentially disturbing actions.
- Replacing national sovereignty over disputed territories and waterways with international control and resource allocation
- Asking countries to remove armament from regions of tension, especially those where resources disputes can lead to armed conflict
- Establishing international peacekeeping and monitoring forces.

**Country and regional positions**

*Asia*

Asia features some of the most heated territorial conflicts due to natural resources, mainly in the South China Sea. China has territorial disputes on seemingly every side of their border thanks to the many wars and expansions in their history, and they have been extremely reluctant to listen to any international pressure. Much like Russia, China often appears to be the bully, and the rest of the world is more sympathetic towards the smaller ones.

*Europe and Russia*

Russia is in one of the most controversial land disputes as they continue to support the rebel movement in Ukraine. As a country that was fragmented after the Soviet Union, the country is clearly defensive when it comes to international powers attempting to regulate land-based ownership claims. In turn, many Eastern European states desire the international intervention to keep them protected from unwanted Russian and neighboring country advances.

Western Europe does not have any active serious territorial dispute, but since many of the countries are the most powerful/influential in the world, they are looked upon to help settle these disputes. America's usual allies generally support the same positions as well. For example, Angela Merkel publicly backed the Philippines in its South China Sea dispute with China, and France has spoken out for the Tibetan people. These states also have an immense interest in oil and other resources provided by international sources, and therefore have a stake in ensuring that areas like the Middle East and Southeast Asia maintain stability.

*Middle East*

The Middle East is host to plenty of resource-based land conflicts, ranging from Pakistan and India fighting over the Kashmir region to the Red Sea. Many state economies are heavily based on natural resources and exports, meaning that strong transportation and control of the resources, like oil, are extremely important. Overall, these countries would not want the West to interfere with their disputes at all. However, countries have recently begun to recognize the usefulness of Western aid in the fight against ISIS, which may lead to more diplomacy in the future.

### *North America*

The United States and Canada are secure and not in regional conflicts over resources. However, they both are part of the globalized world, and therefore any major conflicts that harm resources on the other side of the world can have a direct effect on their economy. This is clearly recognized by the United States, who maintain rooted interests in countries and their conflicts worldwide. Resource management is not always the number one priority of United States interventions, but it can be a motivating factor. Latin American countries are generally focused on internal matters, and have some regional conflicts over resources, including some underground ones like drug trades. They also have untapped energy sources that might lead to future disputes.

### *Pacific islands*

The relative isolation of the Pacific islands, whether it's the smaller ones like Fiji or larger ones like Australia and New Zealand, has led to almost no current territorial disputes. However, as sea levels continue to rise, borders may begin to expand, and serious disputes may arise. Preventative measures are of the utmost importance to ensure that new conflicts don't arise. Or at the very least, the international community must be prepared for when they do.

### *South America*

While South America is in a state of general peace, there are still conflicts that arise over their natural resources and certain disputed areas. South American countries like Chile and Argentina have a focus on nationalistic self-reliance, for better and worse, and this means that their interest in dedicating too much of their own resources to foreign conflicts might not be strong.

Most South American countries, however, do also have a stake in the rest of the world's economy staying strong, and therefore should not oppose any reasonable intervention in foreign affairs that could lead to resource crises. Many South American countries have energy resources that they could tap into; Venezuela exports theirs and Brazil has gained international support, including from the United States, in tapping into their potential offshore oil.

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