



Oceanic Change, Fisheries and Future Interstate Conflict

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The current status of global fisheries is a serious cause for concern. But will states engage in conflict with one another to ensure their continued access to fish?

The status of global fisheries is deeply concerning. Human activities are threatening the wellbeing of the ocean in unprecedented ways. The drivers are well-known: plastic pollution, overfishing, agricultural runoff, toxic pollutants, etc. One of the end results has been a profound impact on wild fish stocks. Commercial fisheries are reaching their capacity at a global scale, and attempts at managing remaining fishery resources in a more sustainable way are undermined in many areas by widespread illegal, unreported, and unregulated (or IUU) fishing. Additionally, climate change is expected to not only lead to a redistribution of resources, as so frequently seems to be the case, primarily from countries in the South to the more industrialised North, but also to an overall drop in the productivity of the oceans.

With these alarming trends in mind, scholars and practitioners are teasing out what the repercussions of altered oceanic conditions are for society at large. Critical research is being carried out on the consequences for regional food and income security, which is providing important insights. For instance, research suggests annual losses of revenues for the global fishing industry could amount to US\$10 billion by 2050 due to climate impacts. The potential for international conflict to erupt over fisheries as a consequence of changes in the marine environment, however, has been under-explored by policymakers and scholars.

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Here we explore the question: will states engage in conflict with one another to ensure their continued access to fish?

Fisheries and conflict

Conflicts over fish between states can be of varying intensity, ranging from verbal disagreements and broken [agreements to militarised conflicts](#) sometimes leading to deaths at sea, and endure for different lengths of time. From history, we also learn that fishery conflicts between states are not uncommon. In fact, many of the militarised post-World War II conflicts between states have involved fishing quotas and maritime boundaries, such as the [infamous Cod Wars](#) playing out between Great Britain and Iceland during the 1950s and 1970s. During the Cod Wars, the two countries were embroiled in a string of confrontations over fishing rights in the North Atlantic, where Iceland wanted to extend its fishing limit but Great Britain did not recognise their right to do so. The major flash points of the conflict included the use of military vessels to patrol the area and defend fishing boats, patrol boats cutting the nets of trawlers, ships ramming other trawlers and frigates, and [Iceland threatening to leave NATO](#). Iceland managed to achieve its aims.

Some may also remember the militarised conflicts over the cod fishery between France and Canada during the 1980s, linked to disagreements around the maritime jurisdiction of St-Pierre and Miquelon, or the “[Turbot War](#)” between the same states in 1995. In the Turbot War, Canada claimed Spain was overfishing the Greenland Halibut (also named Turbot) right outside their waters, and that illegal gear was being employed to do so. The most well-known flash point from this conflict was the chase (lasting for hours) and boarding of the Spanish trawler ‘Estai’. Spain continued sending fishing vessels and even

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deployed patrol boats for protection, but was finally forced by the EU to reach a peaceful settlement with Canada.

More recently, tensions have been rising between China and neighbouring countries, as the Chinese fishing fleet travels farther out to fish and recurrently enters into foreign or disputed waters. The South China Sea in particular is a particularly concerning zone for fishery conflict, as the disputed territory -- with competing claims made by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei -- harbours rich fishing grounds that supply the livelihoods of people across the region. The fishery and territorial conflicts in the South China Sea have the potential to escalate into a much bigger security issue (and, for example, hamper economic growth in the region), especially if outside superpowers such as the USA make the decision to get involved.

The potential drivers of future conflicts over fisheries

Due to changing conditions in the oceans, fishery conflicts between states could become even more prevalent, with potentially grave consequences. Two threats to the ocean (and fish stocks in particular) are feared to trigger future interstate conflict.

Firstly, the abundance of available fishery resources has decreased substantially over the past few decades, as now 33.1 percent of fish stocks are fished at biologically unsustainable levels, 59.9 percent fished at their maximally sustainable capacity and a mere 7 percent remain under-fished ([data from FAO 2018](#)). Consequently, fishermen venture out further into distant waters to compensate for declining returns they often face close to shore. This increased competition between fishing fleets to maintain catch is concerning on its own, but in combination with disputed maritime boundaries it can create

particularly volatile situations. When fishermen enter off-limit or disputed waters in an attempt to maintain yields, this can trigger severe responses, because their fishing can be deemed unauthorised by other states, creating serious security problems between states.

Secondly, the changes in the distribution and potential yield of marine species caused by climate change is feared to cause fractured international relationships and interstate conflict. Pinsky et al. projected that future shifts in the distribution of marine fish and invertebrates could mean that by the end of the century many countries will receive one to five new transboundary stocks in their waters – or Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) – even up to ten new stocks in some EEZs in east Asia where tensions over marine resources have already risen. Greater temperature increases equal more shifts in stocks, and potentially the conditions for more conflict.

These shifts are expected to pose serious issues for cooperation between states on fishery management, and those expectations are grounded in reality: we have witnessed interstate conflict over shifting species already. An exemplary case is the conflict over the northeast Atlantic mackerel that erupted around 2007 between the European Union, Iceland, Norway and the Faroe Islands. Driven by increased sea surface temperatures, the mackerel stock migrated and spawned in more northern and western regions of the Nordic Seas, entering the Icelandic EEZ in massive numbers for the first time. Unable to agree on a suitable management strategy for the stock (with the main stumbling block being the division of quotas), the countries have found themselves in a political gridlock ever since, to the detriment of the stock's health.

Conclusion

Although all these developments are alarming, we must recognise that the link between environmental changes in the marine environment and fishery conflict between states **is a complex one**. Many other drivers and conditions can influence whether or not conflict erupts between states, such as the dependency of the state and its population on the resource or the institutional framework in place for the management of the resource. Because there is no consensus yet on the exact pathway from climate and resources to conflict, we need to better understand which social, political and economic factors can be tweaked to avoid conflicts from erupting. Doing so is imperative to ensure fishery sustainability and maritime security for generations to come.

Image credit: Africom

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