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The Short- and Long-Term Ramifications of Linkages Involving Natural Resources: The U.S.-Mexico Transboundary Water Case

Issue linkage is often recommended as a strategy to enhance cooperation. Lately it has been suggested that this strategy could also be applied to the management of transboundary natural resources. The present study examines the viability of this suggestion. It argues that in the case of natural resources such a linkage may have short- and long-term implications.

Essentially, by constraining the options available to the various parties, such linkages limit the ability to adapt management regimes to changes in the environment. Thereby, they limit the ability to address environmental stresses and crisis. These negative implications may be redressed by mechanisms that will allow the parties to adapt the linkage to new conditions and by tactics that reduce the political cost of a linkage strategy. The study focuses on the negotiation process concerning U.S.-Mexico transboundary water, which was based on a long-term spatial linkage combining the waters of the Colorado River and those of the Rio Grande. This spatial linkage was advanced by a short-term issue linkage, in which the Mexican supported the establishment the United Nations in return for the U.S Federal Government's willingness to accept the spatial linkage. These linkages were found to have both short and long-term adverse implications. The short term implications were delays in negotiations, inconsistency in the legal doctrines held by the different parties during the negotiation and a threat to sovereignty. The main long-term implications identified is the current inability of Mexico to adapt the linkage in response to the ten years drought along the Rio Grande, as manifested in the inability of Mexico to meet its water obligations to the U.S. along the Rio Grande. This has resulted in a controversy between Mexico and the U.S. and between the Mexican federal government and the Mexican border states. It is suggested that flexibility provisions be included when linkages involving natural resources are advanced, so that the necessary adaptations in regimes management will be allowed for without necessitating a renegotiating of the treaty.

Key words: adaptive management; issue linkage; Rio Grande; transboundary water