1. Bibliographic information

The book Resource Wars: The new landscape of global conflict, by author Michael T. Klare, was published in 2001, a few months after the attacks on American soil on September 11.

Its central thesis is that conflicts and wars over natural resources will be the most distinctive feature of the future global sphere of security, and this will involve new geographic maps and the definition of new strategies and new security policies.

The book is divided into nine chapters, wherein it seeks to explain the new parameters of power and global influence and their relationship with natural resources, particularly oil, water and minerals.

The first edition of this book was initially published by Metropolitan Books in the United States of America. It was received very positively by critics and was distributed in several countries, including England and Canada.

2. Writer profile

Michael T. Klare (1963 - ) is a professor at Hampshire College. He is also Director of the Five College Program in Peace and World Security Studies developed in partnership
with five other research centres in Massachusetts. He is considered a leading expert in matters of energy policy.

Throughout his life he has written fourteen books, most notably: *Blood and oil* (2004); *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet* (2008) and *The race for what’s left* (2012), related to the issues of energy and security policies associated with shortage of resources and the global race for oil, natural gas and water, with special emphasis on oil.


3. Impressions left by the text

In the early twentieth century, Albert Einstein stated “I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.” This quote, albeit conditioned by an era marked by the end of World War II, continued to populate human ideals and led, over time, to many theories about the emergence of new conflicts. Of these theories, one of the most famous was the proposal of Samuel P. Huntington (1993) commonly known as “clash of civilizations”. In a time when the Cold War had brought the end of an era of confrontation and defence of different ideologies that had subsequently pushed humanity back to a certain degree, cultural, ethnic and religious differences would be claimed as the driving factor for a new global conflict.

In this book, Klare proposes a different approach designed from the analysis of the global competition for resources. In his perspective, the current political and strategic paradigm is strongly marked by the need felt by nations to protect their sources of resources and trade routes. This paradigm shift led, in turn, to a drastic change in military guidelines and in the role played by the military.

The thesis the author seeks to demonstrate is that, in the future, international conflicts will not be dominated by considerations of political or ideological issues, or by ethnic, cultural or religious issues (although these may be present), but by the ownership and control of resources which are considered essential to the different states. This will prove to be a reality for several reasons, namely, the priority currently accorded by national leaders to economic issues, the continued growth of the population and the exponential growth of some economies, the scarcity of certain raw materials, social and political instability in the regions with the largest reserves of resources and the proliferation of disputes over the ownership and control of these resources.

4. Book summary

After the Cold War, the defining parameters of power and political influence were based essentially on the demonstration of strong military power and on maintaining an extensive system of alliances. In the present time, however, states who wish to assert themselves as
world powers must balance strong military power with a strong economy. In this sense, the new paradigm posits that economic interests and security interests are closely related and tend to prioritize the protection of resource flows, something only military power can guarantee.

An analysis of US political history allows us to demonstrate this reality. Emphasizing the prominence of the economic component in political speeches, Klare shows how American business strategy has focused on a strong military presence in regions with energy resources and on financial, commercial and military assistance agreements. Thus, the author shows that resources have acquired an emerging centrality, especially due to three major factors: global increase in demand, lack of resources and territorial disputes over ownership of these resources.

An example of this reality is oil (Chapter 2), which stands out as the resource most likely to cause conflicts in the twenty-first century. The versatility of oil, the dependence on this product, the increasing demand, the potential inability to meet demand, the interruptions in production flows and the measures taken to overcome them render it a vital element for nations, thus legitimizing the use of military force. This caused the main areas of production and transit routes to turn into areas of tension and conflict. Ultimately, according to Klare, the frequency and intensity of future conflicts depends on the environment in which decisions and political strategies are made, on the future relationship between demand and supply and on the geography of the production and distribution of oil - the main oil sources and reserves span regions that cross more than one country or are located in areas of high political, social and military instability. Illustrating this fact is the strategic triangle composed by the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea basin and the South China Sea (south).

In Chapter 3, Klare notes that the Persian Gulf will be the location most likely to experience conflicts in this century, and that it does not make sense to question if, but rather when and what kind of conflicts will occur. Rivalry for power, religious schisms, social tensions caused by the gap between rich and poor, opposition to the government and foreign military presence and territorial disputes over ownership of territories with oil deposits will tend to intensify tensions and generate conflicts, jeopardizing the interests of other nations. Therefore, the major powers, particularly the US, have advocated and implemented an enhanced military presence as a way to mitigate that possible reality and cooperate in the development of the military capabilities of allied forces by providing weapons, military training and conducting joint military exercises.

The strategic importance of the Persian Gulf to the US can be easily explained: the Gulf holds 65% of global oil reserves. Being the main source of supply to the US economy, it is urgent to ensure a continuous flow.

Interest in the Caspian Sea basin, mentioned in Chapter 4, is mainly related to its extremely high potential in terms of oil and natural gas and to the possibility that this region could be an alternative to the Persian Gulf. The reasons that could lead to confrontations are the same as those set out for the Gulf region, in particular the challenge posed by borders,
territorial disputes, and religious and ethnic factors. Furthermore, factors such as being a landlocked area - requiring the transport of products through adjacent areas under conflict -, the strong Russian presence, the lack of a legal framework of the sea and the proximity of existing conflicts between nations stemming from the disintegration of the former Soviet Union are also sources of tension.

In this region, the power struggle between the US and Russia is visible, with both parties trying to settle and strengthen their political influence, forging ties with local leaders, promising various forms of aid, expanding trade and financial links and strengthening military relations.

The dispute over the South China Sea, developed in Chapter 5, is caused by the region’s extraordinary economic development and presents two critical aspects: the fact that there are strong objections and complaints from different nations regarding the ownership of underwater resources and the fact that the countries involved in this dispute are apparently willing to effectively use force to defend their national interests.

Oil and gas are not the only resources that could lead to conflicts. Water has also been a target of disputes over time. Currently, it is considered that access to water supply systems is essential for the well-being of the population, but population growth and climate change have reduced the quantities available. This becomes increasingly critical in areas with few water sources, low rainfall or in areas where flow must be shared by more than one country. This is the case with the Nile (shared by nine countries) - cf. Chapter 6 - the Tigris-Euphrates system (shared by four) and the Indus (shared by India and Pakistan) - cf. Chapter 7 -, which constitute a focal chronic tension, especially when the water flow decreases or deteriorates from an environmental point of view. Typically, in regions where water is a scarce commodity, states tend to view the struggle for this resource as a legitimate function of national security.

In the case of the Nile, Egypt had been, throughout the years, using military force to ensure domain over the source of the river and its tributaries and to prevent others from blocking the flow. Egypt’s military superiority to countries such as Sudan or Ethiopia and the fact that it enjoys a certain political and social stability has enabled Egypt to maintain its privileged position, in which intimidation and threats have proved enough, especially in the case of projects for deviations or dams that would result in loss of control over the river.

At the core of all this controversy are political and economic factors. From a political point of view, the basic needs of the population are stated as a necessary premise to avoid internal insurgencies, especially in face of the gradual increase in demand resulting from continued population growth. On the other hand, from an economic point of view, water is an essential element for the development of irrigation projects in arid or semi-arid areas.

In Chapter 7 and with respect to the Jordan, Tigris and Euphrates rivers, their respective river systems serve an area where the population is expected to double by 2050. In Jordan, the factors that originate conflicts between states are similar to those presented in the study of the Nile. However, there are two very significant differences. On the one hand, there is
a greater distribution of military power (Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority have some of the largest and best-equipped armed forces and, in the latter case, there is still recourse to forms of terrorism and guerrilla). In turn, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are shared by ethnic groups and different states - Turkey, Iraq and Syria - and are considered essential to the economy and survival of the latter. Dams have been built along the rivers which have sought to control the flow, generate electricity and provide irrigation of agricultural crops. These projects allowed Turkey in particular to keep a check on seasonal flow and to substantially develop irrigated agriculture, which has raised tensions even more in face of the exponential population growth, and it is speculated that projects are in the making to increase food production, compromising the positions of Syria and Iraq.

Finally, tensions between India and Pakistan regarding the Indus River have heightened to the point of a possible confrontation. After the end of British rule, the canal system was divided between countries and this led to confrontational situations. For the time being, negotiations have proved fruitful, but the existence of agreements does not eliminate the possibility of future conflicts, especially when also considering the issue of the Kashmir region.

Of a different nature are the wars related to minerals and wood alluded to in Chapter 8, since these are typically thought to be internal conflicts that tend to persist over time. These conflicts are usually associated with ethnic, political and regional antagonisms, even if the reason for them lies in the financial benefits derived from the exploitation of these resources. In Klare’s perspective, these conflicts resulted from the particular vulnerable position in which many countries were carrying out the decolonization process. Emptied of power and without financial capacity, autocratic regimes proliferated in those countries, denying access to political and economic power to minorities. These minorities have turned to armed revolt, generating conflicts for resources.

Currently, growing international demand for minerals such as iron, gold and diamonds, and the rising price of these resources encourages insurgent groups seeking control of their sources. For a better understanding of this reality, Klare presents three case studies: the conflict-related minerals in Bougainville, the war for diamonds in Sierra Leone and the forest resources on the island of Borneo.

In the last chapter, the author proposes a new geographical approach to the world. Klare argues that our century will witness the emergence of new tension blocks in areas hitherto neglected. This new geographical landscape is dominated by the areas with vital materials and trade routes and, as such, with the attention of the media, and the focus of the deliberations of international political and military powers will be there. For a better understanding of the nature of this new landscape, Klare suggests a new map, replacing the boundaries that currently define the political organization of continents with different ones, colouring the regions according to their resources.

The last issue addressed in the book is the possibility of developing alternative mechanisms to wars. As stated, a viable solution would be to implement an acquisition strategy based on
global cooperation. This would have to be carried out by an international institution with power which would be responsible for the equitable distribution of resources in times of scarcity, and by concerted demand for industrial processes and alternative energy sources. In return, the states would have secured vital supplies of resources.

5. Strengths and weaknesses of the argument presented by the author

Klare offers us a comprehensive view of the problem in question. Written in a style accessible to the general public and structured in a coherent manner, the work addresses and explains the reasons behind many conflicts that we know through the media, but on which information is not always available to allow a full understanding. Furthermore, it reminds us of some geographical and historical aspects that help explain current conflicts, building bridges between the past and the present. Overall, the work can be said to give a brief but comprehensive view of conflicts worldwide.

The theme is undoubtedly current and, even if we cannot assert that this is an original or innovative approach, it is one of the first presentations designed for a broader audience unfamiliar with the rational constructs and language domains of the economic, political and military fields. Thus, the work offers an understanding of the confluence of economic, political and military factors present in conflicts over the world and of the huge dependence of modern societies on natural resources (Rodrigues et al., 2005, pp. 92-96).

However, we cannot help but point out that all thought is conditioned by time and social context. These constraints are visible in the book, first because, having been written in 2001, it ignores some facts and realities that mark the period in which we live (for example, the current situation in Ukraine), and second because it is the perspective of an American on the issue. The quickest way to understand this is by looking at the index and noting the disparity between the pages dedicated to the analysis of conflicts over oil and other resources. Oil deserves the attention of the author over one hundred and thirty-seven pages (corresponding to almost half of the work), indicating a vision conditioned by the culture to which the author belongs. Although this is admittedly a pressing issue, it does not justify, however, the brevity and the lower rigor with which the author explains the main theatres of war in Africa (Chapter 9); something we think is related to a less visible US participation, with a lesser degree of intervention by its military forces on the continent.

Another aspect only briefly mentioned throughout the work that, in our perspective, deserved more attention is the influence of ethnic, cultural and religious aspects in the emergence and persistence of many conflicts. We recognize, as does the author, that in many conflicts, these factors are invoked when in reality the motivations are economic concerns / financial benefits. However, it is true that, for many leaders, these are the real reasons for the participation of the population in these conflicts: the defence of cultural (such as the issue of national identity), ethnic and religious ideals. Proof of this are the terrorist acts carried out in the name of religious beliefs.
A final aspect that seems inconsistent in the book is the final proposal of the author. Referring to an “alternative to war,” Klare postulates the implementation of a world authority whose main task would be to coordinate the management and distribution of resources, especially in times of crisis (Nevins, 2004, p. 262). This is a vague and too general proposal, with an aim that seems to contradict most of the claims made throughout the book. What we criticize is not so much the fact that the author does not properly explain the proposal submitted (we realize that it is a theoretical hypothesis, and that its implementation would involve a new study), but that he proposes an international agency capable of reaching a consensus regarding matters described as likely to generate conflicts. Throughout the book, Klare looks at examples of attempts at consensus and agreements, but stresses that they have not always persisted and / or will endure and that the shortage of resources will necessarily trigger conflict. Klare repeatedly ends the different chapters by asserting the inevitability of future confrontations. In addition, the author stresses time and again that the foundational principle of the new wars lies in the private and inviolable interests of the different nations and that history shows how many times the defence of these interests has inevitably ended in conflict. Thus, it seems contradictory to defend this line of thought while simultaneously presenting a complete proposal which, given the book’s description of the global situation, can only be regarded as utopian.

Still, Klare’s book has the merit of providing us with a view of the current global strategy for the control of areas rich in resources where the political and economic dimensions converge, and for which military intervention capacity is essential. These resources are seen as geostrategic assets1, the control of which can translate into the power of a nation (Soros, 2008, pp. 281-298).

**Bibliography**


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1 By active geostrategic asset we mean a good or a right that is a factor of power associated with national objectives. For example, in national terms, the exclusive economic zone is a geostrategic asset.