

• Home / Opinion / Global Lens

Water a strategic asset that ensures economic resilience

By Abdulwahed Jalal Nori | China Daily | Updated: 2026-06-30 08:51

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The Gansu-to-Shandong ±800 kV ultra-high voltage direct current transmission line originates from the Qingyang converter station in Gansu province. [Photo provided to chinadaily.com.cn]

For more than a century, oil has been the lifeblood of modern civilization, fueling industrial revolutions, shaping geopolitical alliances and influencing the rise and fall of nations. Control over energy resources often translated into economic strength and strategic influence.

Yet as the world enters an era increasingly defined by climate uncertainty, technological transformation, and environmental stress, another resource has quietly emerged as the foundation of future prosperity and stability: water.

The strategic significance of water has long been underestimated. Unlike oil, there is no substitute for freshwater. While economies can diversify their energy mix, replacing coal with solar power or oil with hydrogen, there is no substitute for water.

Every aspect of human life — from food production and public health to industrial development and energy generation — depends on reliable access to freshwater.

This reality is particularly relevant for Asia. Home to nearly 60 percent of the world's population and some of the fastest-growing economies, Asia faces a convergence of pressures that could make water one of the defining strategic challenges of the 21st century.

Rapid urbanization, industrial expansion, agricultural demand, population growth, and climate change have placed unprecedented strain on rivers, lakes, reservoirs and groundwater systems across the continent.

The challenge is not just environmental, but also has geopolitical and developmental dimensions. Manufacturing hubs require reliable water supplies. Agriculture depends on predictable irrigation systems. Expanding cities need resilient infrastructure capable of withstanding both floods and droughts. Water is no longer simply a resource to be managed, but a strategic asset that underpins economic resilience and social stability.

Climate change is intensifying these pressures. Rising temperatures are altering rainfall patterns across Asia.

Prolonged droughts are becoming more frequent in some regions, while others face increasingly severe floods. The Himalayan glaciers, often described as Asia's water towers, feed many of the continent's major rivers, including those that sustain hundreds of millions of people.

The implications of these changes extend beyond national borders. Many of Asia's most important rivers are transboundary waterways. The Mekong River alone supports the livelihoods of millions across China and Southeast Asia. What happens to the river system upstream inevitably affects communities downstream. As demand for water increases, effective management of shared resources will become one of the most important tests of regional cooperation.

Contrary to alarmist predictions, the future need not be defined by water conflicts. History demonstrates that shared resources can encourage cooperation as much as competition. The challenge for Asia is to move beyond reactive management and embrace a proactive framework for water governance. In this regard, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have a unique opportunity to provide global leadership.

China's development experience offers valuable lessons. Over the past decades, the country has invested heavily in water infrastructure, flood control systems, advanced irrigation technologies and large-scale water transfer projects.

These initiatives reflect an understanding that water security is inseparable from long-term development planning. As China advances its vision of high-quality development, water efficiency, ecological sustainability, and climate resilience have become important pillars of national strategy.

ASEAN countries confront similar challenges. Rapid urbanization, food security concerns, and climate-related risks have placed pressure on water systems across Southeast Asia. Rather than address these challenges separately, a stronger China-ASEAN partnership on water security could be substantially more beneficial for the entire region.

Several practical policy initiatives deserve serious consideration.

First, China and ASEAN should establish a permanent China-ASEAN water security cooperation mechanism to facilitate regular dialogue, information sharing, joint research, and coordinated responses to droughts, floods, and other water-related emergencies. Water diplomacy should become a central pillar of regional cooperation, alongside trade, connectivity, and technological innovation.

Second, both sides should increase investment in smart water technologies. Artificial intelligence, satellite monitoring, big data analytics and digital water management systems can significantly improve efficiency and reduce waste.

A China-ASEAN water innovation fund could support collaborative research to design affordable solutions for developing economies.

Third, greater emphasis should be placed on water-efficient agriculture. Agriculture is the largest consumer of freshwater in most ASEAN countries. Joint initiatives focused on precision irrigation, drought-resistant crops, and sustainable farming practices could improve food security while reducing pressure on water resources.

Fourth, regional cooperation on climate adaptation should be strengthened. Shared early warning systems for floods and droughts, coordinated disaster preparedness mechanisms, and joint environmental monitoring programs would help build collective resilience against climate-related shocks.

Fifth, water security should be incorporated into broader regional development frameworks, including the Belt and Road Initiative and ASEAN's long-term community-building agenda.

Infrastructure projects should not only support economic growth but also enhance environmental sustainability and water resilience.

Most importantly, policymakers must broaden their understanding of security itself. Traditional notions of security often focus on military capabilities and geopolitical competition. While these are important, the most significant threats in the coming decades may arise from resource scarcity, environmental degradation, and climate disruption. A nation might have sophisticated military capabilities, but it remains vulnerable if it doesn't have adequate water resources.

For Asia, the lesson is clear. The era in which oil dominated strategic thinking is gradually giving way to a new reality. Water is emerging as the resource that will shape economic resilience, food security, environmental sustainability, and regional stability. The question is no longer whether water security will define Asia's future.

The question is whether governments will act with sufficient foresight to ensure that it is defined by cooperation and shared prosperity rather than crisis and scarcity.

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BACK TO THE TOP