

Klare, Michael T. Resource Wars: the New Landscape of Global Conflict. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001.

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[See table of contents](#)

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Klare, Michael T. *Resource Wars: the New Landscape of Global Conflict*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001.

The proposition that wars are fought over material resources seems, in general, so obvious and incontrovertible, that its very assertion is utterly trivial. But when a recent work attempts to fit this general argument to specific facts, the conclusion becomes not quite so obvious.

Michael Klare in his *Resource Wars: the New Landscape of Global Conflict* argues that the struggle over natural resources is the key element in inter- and intra-state conflict. During the Cold War, ideology was considered the primary factor in conflict. After the Cold War, Samuel Huntington's 1996 work *The Clash of Civilizations* made a notable impact with its argument that ethnicity was to be the prime mover of future wars. Klare's book argues that ideological and ethnic conflicts are being displaced by wars fought over increasingly scarce global resources.

Resource Wars details the potential for conflict over energy fields in the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea and the South China Sea; conflict over water supplies in the Middle East and South Asia; and over mineral wealth and timber in Africa and South East Asia. The book is relatively short and digestible, and has a clear and consistent thrust. One can easily see it being used in Washington policy circles as a brief. Klare perhaps does us a service by collecting the basic information together in one place, but ultimately *Resource Wars* is more polemic than investigation.

Klare runs afoul of a number of issues. The estimation of how much natural resources the world has at its disposal is a much messier business than he makes out in his repeated emphasis on "looming shortages." Advances in technology and the role of the market make estimates of oil reserves and other natural resources difficult to determine. Robert Manning in his book, *The Asian Energy Factor: Myths and Dilemmas of Energy, Security and the Pacific Future*, points out some very extensive and convincing information that contradicts Klare. He describes a long history of erroneous predictions by scientists and economists about potential natural resource shortages. Estimates such as the ones Klare cites often neglect economic factors. Relative short-term scarcity leads to increases in price, which lead to conservation and substitution and greater investment in technological efforts to facilitate the same. The market generally makes it profitable for companies to put greater effort and creativity into resource extraction, and provides incentive to consumers to reduce their consumption. Manning even cautions that there may be an oncoming oil glut, rather than a shortage.

It is not that Klare doesn't provide reasonable and nuanced arguments throughout the book, it is that he does not anticipate such detailed counter-arguments, which in at least one case, were published the better part of a year prior to *Resource Wars*. One is led to suspect that a certain amount of special pleading is taking place. For instance, Klare makes much of the South China Sea as a potential battle zone, but opinion varies on this issue. Manning is skeptical of future conflict and argues that evidence of profitable drilling there is very weak. He relates that in the oil industry the phrase "a South China

Sea” is used as a wry jargon term meaning, “a dry hole.” Manning also argues that the Caspian Sea is not the future oil bonanza that geostrategists make it out to be, and certainly no rival to the Gulf. “Such hopes, however, have fostered perceptions not supported by knowable facts, which have led to dangerous exaggeration of the region’s commercial and strategic significance.” What *Resource Wars* excels at is its description of intra-state conflicts that have developed over lumber and minerals in Angola, Congo, Bougainville, Sierra Leone, Borneo and other countries. Rebel forces find it necessary to capture resource rich territory to fund their campaigns as well as the leaders’ private coffers. The rebels only give up these territories as a last resort. In other cases, indigenous peoples have fought a ragtag action against companies and governments whose resource extraction threatens their homes and livelihoods. What is perhaps most disappointing about *Resource Wars* is that in his conclusion Klare presents only the most tepid and brief attempts at a solution to what are indeed some real problems. He advocates redistributionism, via what he terms “robust” international institutions for mediating disputes, citing as example such agencies as the International Energy Agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations Development Programme and the World Health Organization. It is partly a matter of his recommendations being too little and too late that they seem no more than an afterthought, rather than a fully considered plan. The idea that such institutions could mediate such complex international issues and deal with actors who see their own nation’s resources as one of their few bulwarks against Western encroachment, is a dubious proposition. If there is a case to be made for such a proposal, the author does not make it adequately in the few vague pages that he devotes to it.

Resource Wars can only be recommended as a first step in the discussion of this issue. Resource-based conflict, while undoubtedly important, appears to be not as clear-cut a phenomenon as one would think.

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