The Securitization of Non-Traditional Threats: Water Security in China

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This paper attempts to examine the extent of securitization of water resources in China using the framework of the Copenhagen school. In first laying out the conditions of water shortage and contamination China faces, and the state-wide responses to this, it will be shown that there have been extreme efforts to securitize and address these issues. However I argue that whilst the issue has been securitised at the state level, this has not been successful at the local government level, or with the public at large. This, I argue, is due to the fragmentation of authority between the centre and local level that prevents effective enforcement of goals, and the existence of competing referents and priorities that renders water an instrumentally, rather than intrinsically, valuable resource.

China, in view of its population size, has always been a relatively water-scarce country. Its per-capita water supply is 28% the world average[1] and has a population five times that of the US. This is coupled with sharp regional differences in water supply, with the South of China being relatively water abundant, whilst the North of China has around half the population and arable land but only 20% of the total water supply. [2] Katharine Morton notes the per capita water supply in this region to be dangerously below international standards for human sustainability.[3] Economic reform and the pace of development has worsened the natural disadvantage, as overuse of the Yellow river waters also leads to dependence and depletion of falling groundwater resources. Industrial growth coupled with lax regulation has led to 40% of China's rivers being polluted beyond human use.[4] Two-thirds of the cities throughout China face water shortage; more worryingly, in a number of cities, groundwater used for drinking water is also frequently contaminated.[5] The issue of pollution and existing shortage are intimately tied, with the former putting further strains on the latter.

All of this has serious implications for China's ecological, human and national security. Water shortage has consequence for food security: droughts in 2008-09 have resulted in up to a 20% decrease in grain output, leading to serious concerns for China's food sufficiency, as well as the impact on social stability from increases in food prices.[6] Repercussions from increases in food prices caused by a Chinese demand shock would also be painfully felt across much of the developing world.[7]

Water security also affects the 'harmonious society' promoted by the leadership, as pollution and environmental-related protests have also been increasing in frequency, reflecting increasing public concerns over pollution of rivers and soil.[8] In the long-run, it will have severe impact on the ability of China to continue to grow economically at its current trajectory, with undesirable consequence on the political security and legitimacy of the CCP, whose mandate to rule rests on providing growth rising standards of living for the majority of the population.

These concerns have not gone unnoticed by China's leadership, and environmental and water-related issues have risen in government priority. Within the central leadership, it can be argued that water resources have been securitised, and its shortage recognised as a threat to national security. Caballero and Emmers (2006) argue that the process of securitization involves securitising actors convincing a certain audience of the existential threat to a referent. Whilst NGOs and non-state environmental actors have had a role in influencing the government's environmental agenda, in the Asian context, and particularly in China, it is clear that the state, and in particular, the *central government* is the securitising actor: only it has the mandate and capacity to mobilise efforts to address the

issue. [9] Wen Jiabao, in a speech in 1998, was quoted as saying that the shortage of water was a threat to the "survival of the Chinese Nation". [10] Hu Jintao has also referred to water as a "strategic resource", with implications on food, ecological and national security.[11] In Waever's (1995) definition, these speech acts linking water with the security and existence of the nation constitute securitization, however this seems an unsatisfactory characterisation of securitization: a speech act definition of securitization does not take into account actions, policies, nor the reception and acceptance of the audience to the securitising actor's words.[12] The latter has been a major issue in the securitising dynamics of the Chinese system.

China's efforts to securitize water have been more than just words. Using Curley and Herrington's (2011) framework, one can find evidence of securitization in government policy, official discourse, and in the context of resource allocation to address this problem.[13] Water has been incorporated in the 12th Five Year Plan, with plans to decrease water usage per unit output by 30%; measures to constrain coal production – the largest industrial consumer of water – and also reflect the need to constrain water usage. [14] It has also featured in the No. 1 Document that annually announces government priorities, and the 2008 National Framework for Medium to Long-Term Food Security explicitly links water to other security issues, emphasising the need for water saving.[15] The Chinese government has allocated $600 billion dollars over the next decade to combat the problem of national water shortage, fulfilling Curley and Herrington's criterion of resource allocation.[16] These investments include reservoirs to collect precious glacial water in Xinjiang, multiple hydroelectric dams, and, most ambitiously, $60 billion dedicated to the South-North Water Transfer project (SNWT), a massive feat of hydro-engineering costing three times that of the Three Gorges Dam. Aimed at diverting the abundant waters of the Yangtze in the South, the project involves three vast man-made waterways, channelling waters northwards to feed the Yellow River in a bid to alleviate the problem of drought in the North and sate the demands of megacities like Beijing. Work on the central and eastern channels has already begun, though fraught with delays and complications, and displacing many rural communities.[17] Southern cities worry for their water supply, and it is dubious whether the Yangtze's flow, declining in recent years, will be sufficient to support the Northern regions. Whether the large-scale engineering project will work is another question. Outside experts and some within the Party, including Wang Shucheng, former Minister of Water Resources, have voiced concerns over its feasibility and desirability.[18]

The scale and ambition of these mega-hydro projects reflect in part the technocratic engineering background of China's top leaders, as well as a Confucian notion of 'mastery over nature' that was central to dynastic political legitimacy; and largely, it smacks of desperation. The reliance on these top-down efforts from the Central Government indicates that, whilst water has been securitised as a national security issue within the national government and *Zhongyang* leadership, the same cannot be said for provincial and local governments, nor for the wider public. The measures they have taken – in regulations, funding, and projects – reflect a distinctly top-down, supply-side approach, with little emphasis on addressing the origins of demand. One possible reason why the Centre is so insistent on supply-targeted projects such as the SNWT is perhaps due to a cognisance of the failure of demand instruments: the inability of the centre to engender compliance.

The Copenhagen school's simple delineation of actor, referent and audience fits uneasily with the monolithic authoritarian framework: the centre does not need to *convince* an audience – the whole governmental structure has been mobilised to address the issue, and policies can be dictated without the need for persuasion. However, in this system, which Andrew Mertha has described to be a "fragmented authoritarianism", the decentralisation of power between the national and the provincial and local governments give considerable room for resistance and evasion at the local level; the issue may have been securitised at the centre, by leaders within the Central government, but the audience at the local level have no incentive to accept it, and thus securitization on this level has failed.[19]

Decentralisation has created many collective action problems; firstly in the overuse of public resources such as rivers by provinces, and in getting local governments to invest in public water projects such as dams and reservoirs. Elizabeth Economy notes the dilemma facing local officials, who, between environmental protection and supporting local (polluting) industry that provides employment, tend to choose the latter.[20] Promotion and rewards for local officials depend on quantifiable measures of GDP growth, which is complicated by competing environmental targets in measuring performance.[21]

Fragmented authoritarianism also weakens enforcement of environmental regulation. Whilst the State Environmental Protection Agency was upgraded in 2007 to Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), its provincial agencies are still institutionally and financially weak and reliant on horizontal ties to local governments for funds. The Ministry as a whole suffers from a severe lack of capacity: the entire MEP staff is less than one-sixth the size of the EPA in the US, for a population five times its size; the bureau's weakness in enforcement is therefore unsurprising.[22]

Water, though prioritised, suffers from competition with other referents: while it is crucial to energy security and economic security (and thus political stability) the means to achieve these three goals often conflict, resulting in continued exploitation of resources rather than conservation. Hydro-electric dams are seen as a cheap way to provide energy whilst hitting carbon emissions targets, and are championed by vested interests within the technocratic elite. However, they have damaging impacts on the local environment and regional water security.[23] The necessity for preservation of growth also impacts China's willingness to cooperate on wider climate and environmental issues internationally; despite the impact of climate change on China's glacial water supplies, China refuses to securitize climate change.[24] The 'development imperative' and emphasis on national sovereignty inhibit regional cooperative efforts and water-sharing schemes on the Himalayan rivers.

Expectations of higher living standards also compromise the reception of securitization by the wider population: the wealthy are unwilling to compromise on luxury lifestyles, golf courses or bathhouses.[25] Fear of social unrest over price rises also makes officials cautious with price reforms, and whilst China has finally allowed water prices to rise in 2007, the effect of this is limited as people get wealthier. Whilst public awareness over water and environmental issues has increased, the non-urgency of the issue in the general population shows that securitization has not succeeded; yet motivating lower consumption would be the key solution to solving the water crisis. It could be possible that the Central government fears the social panic and disruption a securitising discourse could cause in the population, and thus is careful not to overplay the issue – anecdotally, the capacity of Chinese citizens to hoard supplies after media scares is well documented.[26]

The culmination of these factors is that the Centre is relying on efforts to increase supply of water rather than seriously targeting the source of demand; they are targeting the symptoms of the malaise rather than the origin, doing their best to ensure the continuity and maintenance of growth in the short to medium-run: economic security is a competing referent with more immediate priority. However this is likely to be at the cost of long-term water security and human security; the more immediate threat from water shortage will be to social stability, as protests and opposition rise.[27] Whilst the Central and National Governments have prioritised the security of water resources and emphasised the existential threat of water shortage, these speech acts have not resulted in securitization at the local level, where rewards and incentives for local officials still favour economics over environment. This limited securitization has had some effectiveness, giving the central government a mandate to push forward large national projects such as the SNWT, but has had little effect at the local level. The decentralisation of power that has been integral to promoting national growth and industry in local provinces is also becoming the bane of Centre-led efforts to curb these threats to it. Current securitising actions have not been enough to address the urgency of the issue. Competing priorities of economic growth compromise environmental efforts at the local level, and this development imperative is too important to the political survival of the government to derail in the short-term, even if at the expense of China's future in the long term. Each new generation of the CCP leadership will be facing the same, ever-mounting problem.

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