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Global Water Challenges and U.S. Foreign Policy: Taking Stock

The Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, signed into law in late 2005, represents a rare moment in Washington when policymakers can put aside partisan bickering and unite on an issue of obvious strategic importance. In a rare display of unity, the U.S. Congress enacted a bill that will elevate the provision of water and sanitation in the developing world as a strategic priority of U.S. foreign assistance. Seven months after the bill was signed into law, and one month after the release of the State Department report outlining the new U.S. grand strategy for addressing global water challenges, we have arrived at an ideal moment to take stock of the challenges ahead and the tools at hand.

The passage of the act and the ensuing strategy brought us to an inflection point: the official recognition that it upholds and promotes U.S. strategic interests in addressing water scarcity, poor water quality, and the lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation across the world. It remains to be seen, however, whether the implementation of the Water for the Poor Act's good intentions will reach the level and degree of commitment that the issue both commands and deserves. While the report drew comprehensive and compelling connections between U.S. strategic interests abroad and mounting international water challenges, a coordinated U.S. response to these challenges remains hampered by a lack of funding and a clear mandate.

The 2006 National Security Strategy states, "The goal of our statecraft is to help create a world of democratic, well-governed states that can meet the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system." Water is a critical component for any strategy aiming to reach this goal—from improving the health of populations to make them more economically and socially productive, to enabling economic development, to promoting regional peace and stability, to even building just, democratic, and responsive institutions. The State Department's report to Congress rightly claims that "water and sanitation are essential to achieving the foreign assistance goal by protecting human health and responding to humanitarian crisis, promoting economic growth, and enhancing security."

In the context of the clear connection between achieving U.S. foreign policy

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Recent Strategy Hours

Next steps in the GWOT

22 June 2006

Shawn Brimley and Aidan Kirby, research associates in the International Security Program, discussed two recent developments in the Global War on Terrorism: the disruption of a terrorist plot and the arrest of 17 suspects in Toronto; the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq and its implications for both the insurgency in Iraq and the broader global conflict.

Lessons from Steadfast Resolve Presentation

On December 10, 2005, CSIS held the Steadfast Resolve exercise, designed to address the concern that a poorly designed government response to the next terrorist attack—particularly in the event of an incident that is harmful but not catastrophic—could disrupt the U.S. economy and society as much as, or more than, the attack itself.

Simulating attacks against two nuclear power plants as a case study, the exercise aimed to examine key leadership challenges that top decisionmakers—at the White House and Cabinet levels—would encounter during the next terrorist episode and to identify the tools and information that would enhance their ability to make effective decisions. Here, we have outlined a selected summary of lessons learned from the exercise, presented at the Strategy Hour on April 21, 2006.

General Observations. In the broadest sense, Steadfast Resolve tested how top officials would calibrate their response to reports of an unfolding terrorist incident when presented with incomplete information. What we found was that their response would be relatively measured and judicious, illustrating some of the progress that has been

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Steadfast Resolve

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made since 9/11 in creating national response plans and in building effective industry response.

Roles, Responsibilities, and Coordination. Steadfast Resolve did not test federal response plans at an operational level, but it unequivocally illustrated the need for senior officials to thoroughly understand the plans available to them for activation. It also highlighted the value of nuclear industry coordination procedures and information requirements in building situational awareness for principals.

Safety and Security. While the ability to target specific sectors using the Homeland Security Alert System (HSAS) is critical, senior federal officials would benefit from better tools to assist them in determining how to raise and lower HSAS levels selectively. The exercise also illustrated the reluctance of senior officials to take the alert level to red, raising a question of whether further tailoring of the alert system may be needed. Equally importantly, it underscored the need to explore the problem of how to determine the conditions and time frame under which to lower levels of alert.

Economic Implications. During the exercise, we observed two key decisions that helped limit the potential economic impact of the attacks on U.S. nuclear power plants: (1) maintaining open transportation routes for international and interstate commerce and (2) opening financial markets for regular business. The direct costs to state and local governments are not well understood; senior leaders would benefit from a better understanding of those costs, less so for the purposes of initial decisions than for a situation in which they need to justify higher alert levels over a sustained period of time.

Public Communication. Government and private-sector officials need to plan for a situation in which media reports emerge within minutes of local law enforcement's learning of the attack, perhaps before state and national leaders have been informed. However rapidly the federal coordination plans are activated, the White House and federal-level messages may still lag behind state/local and industry public messages. Therefore, these nonfederal messages will be a critical component of the local and national

message to the public. At all levels, government officials and industry representatives need to understand that timely, accurate, and credible information will be a crucial component of a strong public communications effort.

■ **Anne Witkowsky, Senior Fellow, Homeland Security Program**



Anne Witkowsky provided insights on the process to put together the simulation, Steadfast Resolve, at a Strategy Hour session on April 21, 2006.

Water: Taking Stock

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objectives and addressing growing water challenges across the world, the State Department, in consultation with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and a host of other government agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academic institutions, and corporations, has outlined three objectives for U.S. international water initiatives as well as supportive guidelines and focal areas: (1) increase access to, and effective use of, safe water and sanitation to improve human health; (2) improve water resources management and increase water productivity; and (3) improve water security by strengthening cooperation on shared waters. This prescription is significant for the simple reason that it is the only attempt by the government to date to clearly delineate U.S. objectives and goals for international water policy. Beyond this historic stepping stone, the content of the objectives and principles are relatively solid.

The areas for action identified by the report are not, in and of themselves, faulty ideas and in fact have a proven track record of success. First, improving governance and water management helps to create an environment in which solutions endure long after U.S. resources are removed from the situation. Toward this end, USAID has worked to establish water regulatory agencies and regulatory methods in Egypt and Armenia that allow water utilities to implement cost recovery measures. Such measures ensure the financial sustainability of operating the utilities and of providing service. Similarly, nurturing domestic financial resources is an effective tool for quickly expanding access to water and sanitation—currently 64 percent of water investment stems from domestic public-sector financing. United States-backed loan guarantees and pooled funds in South Africa and India have supported the expansion of water and sanitation services to an estimated 700,000 people. Investing in infrastructure of appropriate scale and complexity, coupled with sharing technologies and scientific knowledge for the purpose of capacity

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building, will ensure that technologies deployed will continue to be maintained and used until the recipient country is ready and able to take the next step in infrastructure investment. Finally, U.S. government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and even private corporations have made great advances in technologies that provide clean, safe drinking water at the household level. Leveraging these technologies and systems to protect public health and respond to humanitarian crises will continue to be an area of comparative prowess for U.S. foreign assistance. In Uganda alone, the Safe Water System of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reduced the risk of diarrheal disease by 25 percent. In real terms, this means that more children in the classroom are feeling well and ready to learn and that there is greater worker productivity. Procter & Gamble's PuR packet was deployed in the regions affected by the 2004 tsunami and in the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan.

Still, these focal areas largely represent programs already under way and do nothing to address uneven distribution of foreign assistance for water and sanitation or the absence of coordination between the agencies engaged in international water issues. Between FY 2003 and FY 2005, the United States committed \$1.7 billion in official development assistance toward water and water-related projects in developing countries. Fifty-one percent of this total, however, went to just four countries—Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and the West Bank/Gaza. Sub-Saharan Africa, the only region not on track to meet the Millennium Development Goals for water and sanitation, received a mere 14 percent of U.S. assistance. Although 96 percent of the funding was channeled through USAID and the Millennium Challenge Corporation, 15 agencies were involved. Beyond coordination at the regional level between USAID and the State Department, any cooperation or planning was conducted on an ad hoc basis. No single listing of all U.S. water assistance, ongoing or past, exists. No comprehensive set of case studies of successes and failures is available. No mechanism or clearinghouse exists for coordination with other donors and NGOs.

Finally, it is unclear whether the prescribed approach will significantly dampen the effects of global water challenges on U.S. strategic interests or generate a long-term impact. The scale of the issue demands more attention and resources than are currently committed. In order to reach the Millennium Development Goals of halving the number of people without access to safe drinking water, 1.2 billion people, or 260,000 people each day, will need to be connected to safe water supplies over the next decade. Between 2003 and 2005, U.S. efforts provided 24 million people with access to safe drinking water across the world—less than 10 percent of the number of people lacking access in sub-Saharan Africa today. U.S. levels of official development assistance, particularly when compared to other developed countries, simply do not reflect the urgency of these challenges.

Two significant factors inhibited the State Department, USAID, and other agencies in translating the general objectives and principles into new and innovative directions for U.S. action. First, the Water for the Poor Act was void of any additional financial support. While the past two fiscal years have seen a rise in funding devoted to water and sanitation, the increases have been marginal. Second, the reshaping of the roles and responsibilities of the USAID administrator as the new director of foreign assistance has created uncertainty over the nature and direction of U.S. foreign assistance more broadly. Amb. Randall Tobias, confirmed to the new dual role in March 2006, has made clear his top priorities: (1) integrating U.S. foreign assistance into U.S. foreign policy goals, and (2) identifying a set of metrics for measuring progress, identifying priority countries, and developing timelines for projects and programs. At the time the Water for the Poor Act report was being drafted, the transition process and review of U.S. foreign assistance had not yet begun. As this process gets under way and priorities are reshuffled, another opportunity emerges to further integrate global water challenges into U.S. foreign policy and approaches to foreign assistance.

The community of well-governed, responsible governments that meet the needs of their people, alluded to in the National Security Strategy, must consist of countries that are able to expand access to water and sanitation and manage water resources as populations increase, economies develop, and living standards improve—all without jeopardizing ecological health or geopolitical stability. To reach this goal, the United States must refine its overall strategy toward international water issues. The Water for the Poor Act represents a promising moment of foresight and leadership on an issue that will significantly shape U.S. strategic interests abroad for decades to come. Congress must remain engaged in this critical issue and provide the oversight that helps make U.S. government programs efficient and effective. The question remains as to whether this leadership will be sustained in order to inspire a deeper consideration of U.S. policy approaches and an increase in funding to carry out the intentions of any U.S. strategy.

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