



COMMENTARY

Center for Strategic and International Studies ■ Washington D.C.

Below the Surface: U.S. International Water Policy

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June 21, 2007

In the last few weeks, we have seen a torrent of articles and news reports on the subject. *US News & World Report*, for example, ran a cover story under the title “Why You Should Worry about Water: How this Diminishing Resource Will Determine the Future of Where and How We Live.” These and the many other recent writings all serve to emphasize how many of us take for granted a diminishing—and strategic—resource. In the heat of summer, when many Americans spend their days in or around swimming pools sipping various cold drinks, it is easy to ignore that a big chunk of the rest of the world doesn’t have access to clean drinking water. Over a billion people. Beyond that, some 2.6 billion people do not have what we would consider to be adequate sanitation. Think about it this way: Each time you flush a toilet, you are watching a full day’s worth of water per person in the developing world go down the drain.

As we scan the more distant time horizons, the dimensions of the water challenge will probably increase significantly. If you superimpose projections for rapid population growth on a map of the world, it will likely occur in those areas of the world that are already the most distressed when it comes to water. What are the two areas of the world forecast to have the highest population growth out to the middle of the century? Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa. As monumental as the challenges are in those two regions, they do not stop there. Water looms large as a critical catalyst to—or constraint on—development in countries from China to Chile, India to Indonesia, Russia to Rwanda. By 2025, according to the United Nations, it is possible that more than 2.5 billion people will live in countries experiencing serious water stress. The aggregate numbers could rise even further if the effects of global warming and broader environmental degradation persist, as expected.

For all these reasons, one would think that water would be a central component in U.S. foreign policy. Targeting water as an instrument of Washington’s engagement with the rest of the world would enable policymakers to assist with humanitarian relief, strengthen human health, support other public health commitments (such as efforts to address HIV/AIDS), promote economic development, advance opportunities for girls and women, and improve the capacity of countries to protect themselves against drought, on the one hand, or floods, on the other. Furthermore, it would imply important commercial opportunities for U.S.-domiciled corporations working in water-related technologies and processes. Targeting water would also yield other geopolitical dividends—including removing what is a serious obstacle to stability and security within states and reducing the possibility for conflict or tension between countries with shared water resources. Finally, water represents an avenue for the United States to demonstrate leadership in the world at a time when its image has eroded so considerably. In short, a water-centered set of policies could represent a remarkable opportunity for the United States to “do good” while “doing well” when it comes to pursuing its own interests in the world.

If that’s the theory, then the reality becomes all the more difficult to comprehend. According to the OECD, U.S. official development assistance commitments for water supply and sanitation in 1999-2000 amounted to less than two percent (\$165m) of total national assistance—the lowest (with New Zealand) of any OECD member state.¹ By 2003-2004 the U.S. level had grown to \$521m, according to the same OECD statistics, but the lion’s share of the rise was attributable to increased financial assistance directed to Iraq—and even at that level, total assistance was well below the corresponding level for Japan, the OECD leader in water spending. Of the water-related U.S. support not channeled into Iraq, moreover, a disproportionate percentage was allocated to the Middle East and not to regions such as

¹ OECD, “Measuring Aid for Water: Has the downward trend in aid for water reversed...?” March 2006 report presented at the Fourth World Water Forum <http://www.oecd.org/document/0/0,3343,en_2649_201185_23180544_1_1_1_1,00.html>.

sub-Saharan Africa where the problems are the greatest. In other words, politics are trumping need. *Le plus ça change....*

In a recent report to Congress mandated by the Water for the Poor Act of 2005, the State Department maintained that in FY2006, the U.S. Government obligated \$844 million in bilateral and multilateral assistance for “water, sanitation, and related activities around the world.”² That level probably represents a better-than-best-case scenario because a very wide range of government activities were included. The reality, however, is that U.S. water-related foreign assistance is small in comparison with other OECD donors, concentrated in a relatively small number of countries in which water needs are less pronounced than elsewhere, and dispersed across many diverse parts of government.

In the light of humanity’s water predicament—current and future—there is a powerful case to be made that the United States can and should play a far more assertive role. Such a role would improve conditions across the world while promoting broader U.S. interests—an authentic “win-win” proposition. To bring water to the policy surface, however, it implies a crosscutting consensus across economic development and security communities that water is critical to the full spectrum of U.S. interests. It would require a new equilibrium between traditional geopolitical interests and broader humanitarian interests. It means committing more scarce financial resources. It also suggests the critical need for a high-profile office (such as the equivalent of PEPFAR, the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) or the establishment of a special ambassador with sufficient personnel to carry out a broader program. Above all, however, it requires the political will to put a far-sighted strategy into place.

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² U.S. Department of State, “Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act (P.L.109-121) Report to Congress,” June 2007
<http://www.state.gov/g/oes/rls/rpts/85873.htm>.