



WATER SECURITY AS AN EMERGENT OPPORTUNITY IN CANADA

Date: August 15, 2019

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented throughout the evening and does not exclusively represent the views of the speaker, or the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On August 15th 2019, the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies hosted its monthly roundtable focusing on “Water Security as an Emergent Opportunity for Canada”. The presentation was delivered by Dr. Zafar Adeel, a serving member on the editorial boards of Sustainability Science (Springer) and New Water Policy and Practice Journal (PSO). Dr. Adeel highlighted various emerging and continuing water security threats in British Columbia, emphasizing their similarities to other global issues. He directed his talk to addressing the impacts of climate change on water insecurity and its ability to create new threats to Canada’s coastal cities. The following roundtable discussion centered around a dialogue on the persistent insecurity in Canada’s indigenous communities as a security concern describing the matter as a play off between policy and security affairs. Audience members then brought into question the suitability of using the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine to intervene where a nation’s water security is at risk and addressed the complexities of the ‘react’ pillar in intervening militarily.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

The presentation established what an emerging water security threat was and discussed the risk of a global water crisis in relation to scarce water resources. Thereafter, BC was examined through the lens of its water scarcity impacts on vulnerable communities such as Indigenous populations and smallholder farmers. Finally, the presentation covered forecasts for the future in which water problems could contribute to instability in states creating threats for both national and global food markets.

Roundtable

The roundtable focused on the risks of weaponizing water globally and the effects it would have on emerging threats. Additionally, discussion centered around the policy implications of water security for indigenous communities and the possibility of triggering a collective consciousness for water issues. Audience members also discussed the underpinning security implications for using R2P in dealing with the threats of water scarcity and dependability.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Zafar Adeel began his presentation by defining the term water security as “pertain[ing] to the individual experience of assured access to clean water”. Due to the increased risk of water security threats, international institutions have collectively increased their attention to water security. In 2010, the United Nations (UN) declared water security as a priority action area and in November of 2016, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) held a special session on water, peace and security to invest in water security.

Per a 2019 global risk report by the World Economic Forum Davos, a global water crisis is ninth in terms of likelihood and fourth in terms of impact. The water withdrawal per capita has marginally increased over the years as most regions’ water resources are for agricultural use, apart from Europe. Canada alone uses 300 cubic meters per capita of water, leading the world in water usage. Moreover, dryer countries like China, Saudi Arabia, Libya, South Korea, UAE, Jordan and India are now buying land in Africa to supply food for their own countries in addition to the water resources that come with it. This has enabled temporary access to water security for wealthy states but has also infringed on water security for African nations. The impact on the lack of access to water security includes 2.1 billion people without access to “safe” water; 3.5 billion people who are not meeting the right to water and 2.4 billion have no access to sanitation. Furthermore, it can be argued that the impacts of climate change have cost countries like the United States a significant amount of money in repairing infrastructure due to hurricanes, flooding and water damage. Therefore, the nexus of climate change, water insecurity and food shortages create new security threats for the globalizing world.

B.C. has a history of failing to deal with vulnerable communities and water security. Dr. Zafar Adeel noted that there is a higher level of health impacts for women, children under five, the elderly and indigenous populations. Additionally, the failure of water security impacts the livelihood of smallholder farmer and threatens the culture of indigenous populations. This leads to an increase in the overall suicide rate in minority populations as the sense of desperation for water and the need to count ever drop becomes overwhelming.

Finally, the presentation covered emerging threats to Canada's water security. A United States intelligence firm found that as water insecurity becomes more common, the threats of destabilizing states is much higher as water shortages become more acute and shared basins become more common. In Canada, as sea levels are rising in coastal areas, there is an increase in water scarcity in dense urban areas and persistent boiling water advisories run through indigenous populations. Thus, the threat to Canadian water is imminent. The B.C. government needs to rethink urban growth in coastal areas, investing in green infrastructure, creating dependable technology on flood forecasting in order to address the threats of water security. Ecosystem reforestation and conservation are solutions that Dr. Adeel put forward in order to lessen the burdensome toll of these emerging threats. In addressing these issues internationally, Canada needs to foster transboundary water management programs, as well as engage in arctic and natural water resource management. With an adaptive technological turn, investment in water research and scientific advancements is required in order to adequately address the emerging threats of water security.

Roundtable

Audience members posed questions to Dr. Adeel which ranged from addressing the right of water to the weaponization of water; and finally, the implication of boiling water advisories on indigenous populations.

Many pointed out that if water is a positive right, then governments and municipalities must provide water services to people, just as they have a right to security from external threats. This led into a discussion surrounding the weaponizing of water by state leaders or terrorist organizations. This new concept questioned the use of R2P and its implications on water security. While most advance the idea of staying in the 'prevent' phase of R2P, the question of using the 'react' pillar to provide citizens with adequate relief from the threats of water insecurity was addressed. Audience members pointed out that the implications and complications to intervene military would be hefty.

Additionally, roundtable discussion questions addressed whether insecurity in Canada's indigenous communities are a development issue or a security concern. Dr. Zafar Adeel pointed to an example of an indigenous band located in between Surrey, B.C and White Rock, B.C. This community, with an average of two hundred households originally had running water. However, as the pipe systems were not maintained, water supply to the community was cut off leaving close to two hundred families with no access to safe drinking water. Audience members believed that the problem was both a security concern and a policy issue. Fund to indigenous communities is not adequate. Additionally, the insecurity created within the communities prevent indigenous bands from implementing changes. What is required is that we reshape how water is governed so that the threat of water scarcity becomes less severe. More directed research is needed regarding Vancouver's green infrastructure in order to create resistance against climate change.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION AND WEST COAST PERSPECTIVES

Presentation

- The nexus of climate change, water insecurity and food shortages create new security threats for the globalizing world.
- British Columbia is failing to deal with vulnerable communities and their water security concerns.
- The greatest potential for water relief from the scarcity in B.C is through reduction in water usage by agriculture.
- The government needs to rethink investing in urban growth, green infrastructure and creating dependable technology on flood forecasting for the future of Canada.

Roundtable

- If water is a positive right, then governments and municipalities must provide water services to people, just as they have a right to security from external threats.
- Water insecurity in Canada indigenous populations is both a security concern and a policy issue.
- What is required is that the government reshapes how water is governed so that the threat of water scarcity becomes less severe.
- More directed research is needed regarding Vancouver's green infrastructure in order to create resistance against climate change and water insecurity.



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