ODNI Releases Global Water Security ICA

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While wars over water are unlikely within the next 10 years, water challenges – shortages, poor water quality, floods – will likely increase the risk of instability and state failure, exacerbate regional tensions, and distract countries from working with the United States on important policy objectives, according to an assessment prepared by the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC).

The Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) "Global Water Security," was prepared by the National Intelligence Council (NIC) of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and released by the ODNI today.

The ICA is based on a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) requested by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to assess the impact of global water issues on U.S. national security interests over the next 30 years. It is intended to support a greater number of policymakers who share the concern that pressures on existing water resources may exacerbate local and regional tensions, perhaps to the point of conflict.

The ICA also notes that, as a consequence of water challenges globally, the demand for U.S. assistance and expertise will increase providing the U.S. with opportunities for leadership and forestalling other actors from achieving the same influence at U.S. expense.

The ICA considers:

- A select number of strategically important basins that were addressed in the NIE and are strategically important to the U.S. and transboundary issues including: Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, Mekong, Jordan, Indus, Brahmaputra, and Amu Darya. The IC judged that these examples are sufficient to illustrate the intersections between water challenges and U.S. national security.

- Three key drivers: population, economic development, and climate change.

- Assumptions: Water management technologies will mature along present rates, country water policies will remain consistent, and where capable, countries will continue to apply their growing economic capacities and technologies to address their water challenges.

The Bottom Line: During the next 10 years, many regions will experience water challenges – shortages, poor water quality, or floods – that will increase the risk of instability and state failure, increase regional tensions, and distract them from working with the United States on important U.S. policy objectives. Between now and 2040, fresh water availability will not keep up with demand absent more effective management of water resources. Water problems will hinder the

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ability of key countries to produce food and generate energy, posing a risk to global food markets and hobbling economic growth. As a result of demographic and economic development pressures, North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia will face major challenges coping with water problems.

Key Judgment A:We assess that during the next 10 years, water problems will contribute to instability in states important to U.S. national security interests. Water shortages, poor water quality, and floods by themselves are unlikely to result in state failure. However, water problems – when combined with poverty, social tensions, environmental degradation, ineffectual leadership, and weak political institutions – contribute to social disruptions that can result in state failure.

Key Judgment B: We assess that a water-related state-on-state conflict is unlikely during the next 10 years. Historically, water tensions have led to more water-sharing agreements than violent conflicts. However, we judge that as water shortages become more acute beyond the next 10 years, water in shared basins will increasingly be used as leverage; the use of water as a weapon or to further terrorist objectives also will become more likely beyond 10 years.

Key Judgment C:We judge that during the next 10 years the depletion of groundwater supplies in some agricultural areas – owing to poor management – will pose a risk to national and global food markets.

Key Judgment D:We assess that from now through 2040 water shortages and pollution probably will harm the economic performance of important trading partners.

Key Judgment E: We judge that, from now through 2040, improved water management (e.g., pricing, allocations, and "virtual water" trade) and investments in water-related sectors (e.g., agriculture, power, and water treatment) will afford the best solutions for water problems. Because agriculture uses approximately 70 percent of the global fresh water supply, the greatest potential for relief from water scarcity will be through technology that reduces the amount of water needed for agriculture.

A full copy of the report is available here.

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