

Playing the Blame Game in China's Water Crisis

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 **Walter Russell Mead's Blog**

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China has a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad water problem. A recent water census [discovered](#) that 28,000 rivers have disappeared over the past two decades. The country's per capita water

resources are just one quarter of the world average. Shockingly, forty percent of what little water China does have is too toxic for humans to safely touch, let alone consume. To its credit, Beijing seems to be taking the problem seriously, allocating hundreds of billions of dollars to cleaning up its beleaguered environment and [vowing](#) to “fight for every drop of water or die” by damming up its rivers.

But every narrative needs a good villain, and with a new climate change draft report due to be released by the IPCC this Friday, China’s leadership has a scapegoat in mind: global warming. A warmer world means fewer glaciers; the seasonal melt of glacial ice in the Himalayas resupplies much of China’s fresh water. Higher temperatures could lead to short-term flooding but long-term drought. But most importantly, foisting the blame on to climate change is a political masterstroke for the Chinese Communist Party: despite the fact that China currently consumes nearly half of the world’s coal, the majority of the greenhouse gases we’ve emitted so far have come from the developed world. Therefore, the country’s water shortage must be the fault of the West, not China’s own disastrous environmental policies.

But as Reuters [reports](#), China’s rapid, centralized style of mega-development might be the bigger culprit:

“China’s water shortages stem more from problematic urbanization and water resource management, rather than the scapegoat of climate change,” said Zhou Lei, a fellow at Nanjing University who studies how industry affects the environment.

“In my home town in Jiangxi, the water system consisted of underground springs, ponds, wetlands, brooks, streams, and seasonal rivulets, but all these have been totally ruined in the last 20 years due to a catastrophic urbanization plan, a construction mania and transport megaprojects,” he said. [...]

The reliance on megaprojects to solve shortages has created a vicious circle, channeling water to state-owned farms, giant industrial plants or hydropower stations, diverting natural flows and leaving surrounding areas more parched than before.

China’s recent rise has been facilitated by its ability to mobilize workforces, infrastructure projects, and spatial reorganizations on a massive scale. So far, it seems to be attempting to solve its water crisis with more of the same—with dams and cross-country pipelines. But if these kinds of megaprojects are what got China into this mess in the first place, it’s hard to see them as some kind of magical fix.

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