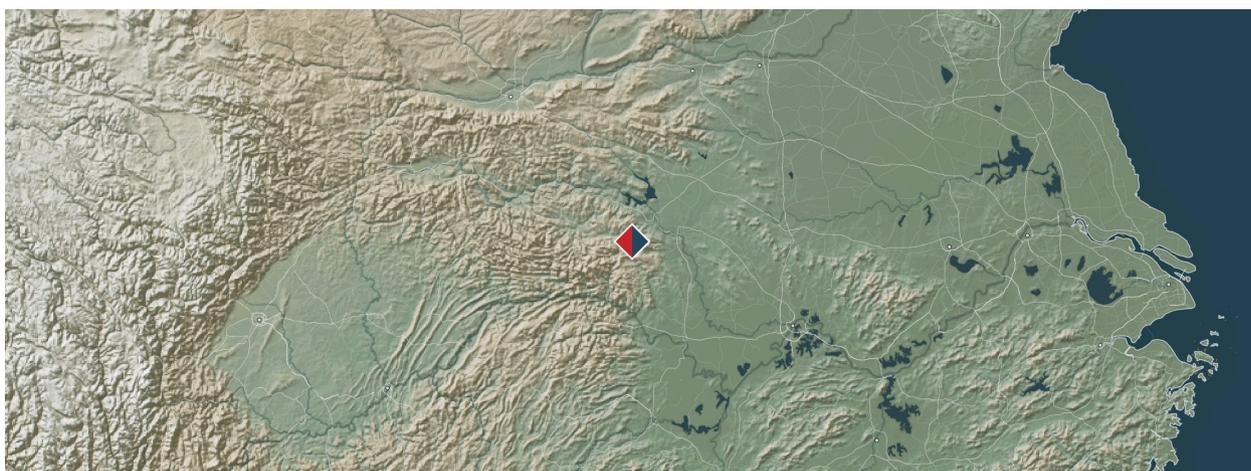




Conflict Factsheet

South-North Water Transfer Project in China

Type of conflict Main	Intensity 1
Conflict Locality Eastern Asia	Time 2002 –ongoing
Countries China	Resources Agricultural / Pastoral Land, Water



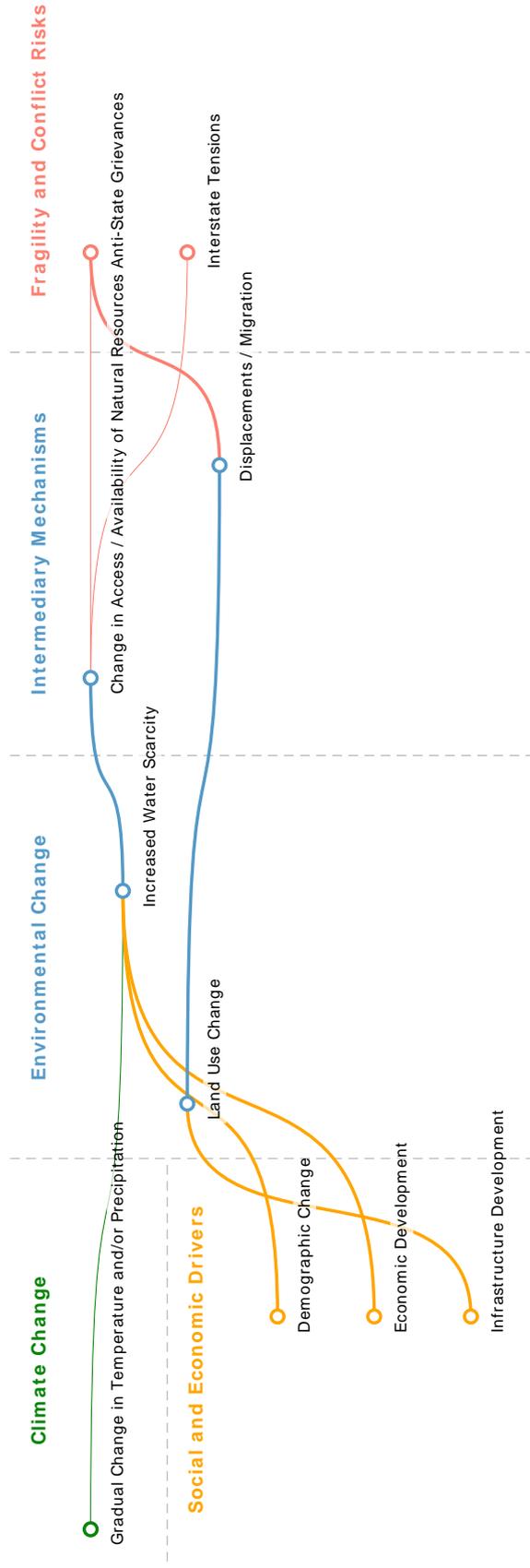
Transboundary
water
management

Conflict Summary

The Chinese central government is seeking to address the highly uneven distribution of domestic water resources through the construction of a vast water diversion project, known as the South–North Water Transfer Project (Chinese: #####). The project aims to divert water from the water-rich regions in the south to the drier regions in the north via three routes: East, Central and West. However, domestic and international concerns exist relating to environmental degradation, huge construction costs and social upheaval, as poorer provincial citizens are uprooted to make sacrifices for those in more affluent cities.



Conceptual Model



Context Factors



Agricultural / Pastoral Land, Water



Conflict History

The notion of a South-North Water Transfer Project was already articulated by Chairman Mao in 1952 when he noted that ‘the South has plenty of water and the North lacks it, so if possible why not borrow some?’ This observation catalysed a vision to construct a vast water infrastructure project, enabling the diversion of billions of cubic metres of water from China’s water abundant south to the water poor cities of Beijing and Tianjin, and the northern provinces of Hebei, Henan and Shandong ([Freeman, 2010](#)). In scale, the project is the largest of its kind ever undertaken.

Water Availability in China

The low per capita water availability in China is partly the result of its huge population, currently at more than 1.3 billion, a third of which is located in the relatively dry Huang-Huai-Hai river basins in northern China. China’s water resources have been further exacerbated by low water productivity in the agricultural sector and rapidly expanding industrial and energy sectors ([Freeman, 2010](#)). The capital Beijing, for instance, has per capita water resources of less than 100 cubic meters, far below the 500 cubic metres which indicate acute water shortage by international standards ([China Daily, 2014](#)). Against this backdrop, climate change is disrupting weather patterns and accelerating the evaporation of glaciers. This, in turn, has further diminished China’s surface water supplies ([Freeman, 2010](#)).

After extensive research, the \$62 billion water transfer project was officially approved by the State Council on 23rd August 2002. Work commenced on the eastern section in December with construction on the central section beginning in the year 2003. The main project is being covered by a special limited-liability company which will oversee the construction, operation and maintenance, whilst the local administration and infrastructure elements are being managed individually by a water supply company from each province ([water-technology.net, 2015](#)). In total, the project has three sections: the eastern line, running 1150km from the lower Yangtze River to Tianjin; the middle line, from Danjiangkou to Beijing; and a western line, which may eventually connect the headwaters of the Yangtze and Yellow rivers across the high altitude Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. The western route still remains largely conceptual and may ultimately prove technically impossible to construct ([Kaiman, 2014](#)).

Citizen Reaction to the Project

At the local level, the greatest challenge to the project are citizen resettlements. Over 300,000 people are expected to be displaced by the water diversion, roughly 180,000 from Hubei and the remaining 150,000 from Henan ([Freeman, 2010](#)). Citizens that have already been resettled have complained about governmental support and the quality of the resettlement housing provided. In 2012 and 2013, authorities in Danjiangkou City handled 1021 petitions filed by 2553 immigrants who complained about land loss, unemployment and housing quality ([People’s Daily, 2014](#)). Official corruption has also been suggested, with villagers complaining that their compensation has been siphoned off by cadres, through the undervaluation of farmers’ plots of land and over-estimating their own holdings ([Watts, 2011](#)). Additionally, there has also been criticism within China, due to the redistributive nature of the project. Environmental advocate Ma Jun, of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, argues that the project’s benefits accrue predominantly to China’s northern citizens, especially the residents of Beijing ([Freeman, 2010](#)).

International Dimension



The South-North Water Transfer Project also has an international dimension which could lead to future conflicts. Many of the Southern Chinese major rivers (e.g. the Brahmaputra, Salween and Mekong) subsequently cross the Chinese borders and flow into South and South East Asia. Any major upstream diversion would therefore entail significant (and often negative) economic, societal and environmental consequences for the countries downstream. As a consequence, downstream countries such as Vietnam and India are likely to contest this development. In the case of India, the potential effects would not only be economic, but also religious, as the Brahmaputra is revered as a sacred water source. Chinese interference with water descending from the Himalayas, therefore, has the potential to ignite future conflicts within the region ([Meyer, 2014](#)).

Resolution Efforts

Chinese officials recognize the pressing need to reduce pressures on existing water supplies through a range of methods, including tightening regulations to prevent water pollution, planning for water allocation and management of water quality ([Freeman, 2010](#)).

Internal attempts have also been made to curb the total amount of water used, but government efforts to reduce consumption by raising the cost of water have proven unpopular and any reductions in pressure on existing water supplies have been modest.

The intention to complete all sections of the South–North Water Transfer Project remains and resettlements are on-going.

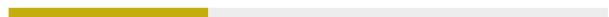


Intensities & Influences

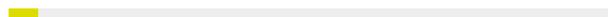


INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity



Human Suffering



INFLUENCES

Environmental Influences



Societal Influences



Diplomatic Crisis

No diplomatic crisis



Violent Conflict

No



Salience with nation

National



Mass displacement

Less than 100.000 and less than 10% of the country's population are displaced within the country.



Cross Border Mass Displacement

No



Resolution Success

Resolve of displacement problems

Displacement continues to cause discontent and/or other problems.



Reduction in geographical scope

There has been no reduction in geographical scope.



Increased capacity to address grievance in the future

There is no increased capacity to address grievances in the future.



Grievance Resolution

Grievances have been partially addressed.



Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity

There has been no reduction in intensity





Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Improving resource efficiency

2

The Chinese government has adopted some measures to ease the pressures on existing water supplies and to curb the amount of water used.

Resources and Materials

References with URL

[China Daily \(2014\). South-North Water Diversion Project Starts to Supply Water to Beijing](#)

[Freeman, C. \(2010\). Quenching the Dragon's Thirst the South-North Water Transfer Project—Old Plumbing for New China?](#)

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[Meyer, E. \(2014\). China's Grand Water Plan](#)

[Water-technology.net. \(2015\). South-to-North Water Diversion Project, China](#)

[Watts, J. \(2011\). China Water Resettlement: 'Honest Folk have Lost Out'](#)

Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/south-north-water-transfer-project-china>