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INTRODUCTION

The Navigating Peace Initiative's Water Conflict Resolution in the United States and China Special Report

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Water conflicts have increased in number and severity throughout China over the past 25 years in the wake of burgeoning water demand, inefficient use of existing resources, and increasing levels of water pollution. The Western press has frequently reported on conflicts over large-scale water projects in China—the Three Gorges Dam and the massive south-north water transfer project. The Western press has frequently reported on conflicts over large-scale water projects in China—the Three Gorges Dam and the massive south-north water transfer project. Less public but equally, if not more threatening, to human and ecological health are the growing inter- and intra-provincial water conflicts over pollution and smaller dams.

The United States also faces growing water conflicts, such as disputes over the damming of the Colorado and Columbia rivers, the intergovernmental and interagency conflicts stemming from the project to restore the Florida Everglades and Missouri River, and the unsustainable draw downs of rivers, lakes, and groundwater aquifers to quench the thirst of growing southwestern cities. In addition to water quantity disputes, cities, farms, industries, and land developers increasingly clash with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency over limits to water use as part of enforcing the Endangered Species Act and tougher water quality standards.

Both governmental and nongovernmental sectors in the United States and China are experimenting with institutions, regulations, and other mechanisms to solve the expanding water disputes. Ultimately, both countries need to develop stronger water conflict resolution institutions that produce: (1) faster resolution of water conflicts; (2) more creative, satisfying and enduring solutions; (3) reduced



Water Conflict Resolution Working Group and CEF staff on the campus of Beijing University. © Mike Eng

transaction costs; (4) improved working relationships among public, private and citizen stakeholders to deal with water disputes; and (5) increased stakeholder involvement in decision-making for water development and protection, which ultimately could help prevent conflicts from erupting.

In recognition of these common water challenges, in 2002 the Environmental Change and Security Program's (ECSP) Navigating Peace Initiative—supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York—created the U.S.-China Water Conflict Resolution Working Group. This water working group was made up of eight individuals (four from

each country) and over the course of 18 months they met with government agencies, legal experts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and researchers in Tucson (Arizona), Beijing, and Washington, DC who specialize in water and natural resource conflict issues to explore water disputes and resolution strategies.

The U.S.-China Water Conflict Resolution Working Group's research presented in this special report not only describes similar water challenges in the two countries, but also demonstrates how water conflict resolution might prove to be a promising area for environmental cooperation between the United States and China. For example, while the federal and state governments in the United States have considerable experience in dealing with water use and water rights disputes in arid regions, they increasingly face water quality conflicts stemming from agricultural runoff and population pressures. China has been dealing with severe water quality conflicts much longer and could offer important insights to their U.S. counterparts while benefiting from American expertise in mediation and integrated water basin management. In pairs, the group produced four research papers:

1) Mike Eng (U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution) and Ma Jun (Institute for Public and Environmental Affairs) examine the trends in the United States and China to adopt more collaborative approaches to solving water disputes, as well as present the kinds of tools, incentives, and capacity building needed to promote more lasting solutions to water disputes.

2) S. Elizabeth Birnbaum (American Rivers) and Xiubo Yu (Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resource Research) focus on how NGOs in the United States and China have been pushing for greater transparency and more citizen input into decision-making around dam construction, dam removal, and river restoration.

3) Irene Brooks (International Joint Commission) and Liu Hongxia (Yellow River Conservancy Commission) examine the potential of river basin commissions as a mechanism for water conflict prevention and resolution. They not only examine two U.S. commissions (Delaware and Susquehanna) and the Yellow River Conservancy Commission, but also speculate on lessons offered by the International Joint Commission, which has proven to be a strong mechanism for cooperation and conflict prevention between Canada and the United States.

4) Wang Xuejun (Beijing University) and Jay Stein (Stein & Brockmann) compare inter-basin transfers as a water conflict resolution mechanism in the China and the United States, focusing on the Yellow River/ Hai Basin transfers and the San Juan/ Chama Project.

The first three papers are published in their entirety below, while the fourth paper on inter-basin transfers is summarized since it is to be published elsewhere. Research assistants in the China Environment Forum and ECSP also produced a short overview of transboundary water challenges facing China for this report.