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Headline: Threat more urgent than global warming

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Climate change is recognized as an imminent danger, but the threat to existing freshwater resources requires more immediate attention.

While world attention in the past decades has been more focused on implementing the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, a nonbinding agreement, other international laws governing the efficient and harmonious use of existing resources have been neglected.

One such law, the Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, adopted by the UN National Assembly in 1997, has been ratified by only 36 countries. America and China are not among them.

Vietnam is the only Southeast Asian country that has ratified it.

The convention requires UN member states to consider the impact of their actions on other states with an interest in a water resource (such as the Mekong River), and to equitably share the resource, mindful of variant factors like population size and availability of other resources.

Member states are required to provide information to other states on the condition of their shared watercourse and their planned uses for it, allowing sufficient time for consideration and objection if the use is perceived harmful.

They are also required to negotiate a mutually acceptable solution if a use is perceived harmful, or seek arbitration in global institutions such as the International Court of Justice.

There are also provisions on reasonable damage control, with states obligated to take remedial steps and/or compensate for losses caused to other states. Other provisions deal with managing natural damage to waterways, such as those caused by drought or erosion.

The threat of vulnerable freshwater resources being overexploited, polluted or depleted is even more imminent than global warming. Reports presented last month at the Global Water Conference 2016 said 780 million people in developing countries lack access to clean water and 3.4 million people die yearly from water-related diseases. Every 20 seconds, a child dies from such a disease.

While clean water is a crucial factor in improving sustainable food production and reducing poverty and hunger, more than 80 percent of sewage in developing countries is discharged untreated, polluting rivers, lakes and coastal areas.

It is projected that by 2025, the proportion of the world's population living in water-stressed countries will rise by two-thirds.

A World Bank report, "High and Dry: Climate Change, Water and the Economy," concludes that limited and erratic water availability reduces economic growth, induces migration, and ignites civil conflict, which fuels further potentially destabilizing migration.

Water sources have even been held hostage for evil purposes, such as the Islamic State's reported use of Taqba Dam in Syria early this year.

In Southeast Asia, drought and salination caused by harsh weather and alleged water storage at dozens of upstream dams on the Mekong River bankrupted about 1.5 million farmers in Vietnam. For five years now, Mekong Delta farmers have suffered from the absence of regular flooding that helps fertilize the delta, kills pests and brings an abundance of seafood.

Experts worry that the diversion of Mekong waters by Thailand and Cambodia to other regions is changing the water regime and the ecosystem in the delta. They say the development or diversion of major transboundary rivers originating in Tibet, such as the Brahmaputra and the Mekong, can cause tensions in relations with China's neighbors.

The Mekong River Commission (MRC), the only intergovernmental organization that works directly with the governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam, and engages Myanmar (Burma) and China as dialogue partners, has tried to facilitate joint management of shared water resources and sustainable development of the Mekong River. But controversial issues have emerged, such as dam building or water diversion.

The MRC has adopted procedures for water quality, data and information exchange and sharing, water use monitoring, consultation and for maintenance of flows on the mainstream. But it lacks an effective dispute-settling mechanism. Furthermore, the procedures do not cover partners. Vietnamese officials have complained that the Chinese do not share their water level monitoring data during the dry season, making it difficult for them to plan water storage and use.

The riparian countries are now seeking to learn from other models in addressing transborder challenges, like the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, which consists of 14 member states and the European Union.

To cope with freshwater shortage, measures have been applied by the Lower Mekong countries, including diverting water, building reservoirs, drip irrigation and digging wells to collect water. But all these measures can go to waste if the downstream nations have no control over the source of water supply.

Effective collaboration among nations is needed to manage water resources and deal with environmental, public health and other issues. An interesting example is the compromise reached by Russia, China and Mongolia to preserve the ecosystem of Baikal, the largest freshwater lake in the world.

In 2014, China pledged US\$1 billion in credit to the Mongolian government to build a hydropower plant on Selenga, one of the 300 rivers flowing into Baikal. Russia protested, fearing that the project would negatively affect the lake's ecosystem—a view supported by Unesco, which said rare species of birds and fish could disappear.

Last June the three countries agreed to temporarily freeze the project to build an eco-corridor in the area. Early this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin wrote off Mongolia's US\$174 million debt and promised to consider reducing future tariffs charged on power sold to it, which amounts to US\$25 million a year.

International collaboration in water resources management can facilitate cooperation in other fields, boost understanding between nations, and open up opportunities for further economic and political cooperation.

The Paris Agreement has shown that nations can reach consensus on common threats to humanity. It also shows that major powers wield decisive influence. They should take the initiative in preserving and sustainably using fresh water, one of our most valuable and vital natural resources.

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