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Quenching China's Thirst: The Politics of Water Shortage

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Oral Presentation O6.4

QUENCHING CHINA'S THIRST: THE POLITICS OF WATER SHORTAGE

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China currently boasts the lion's share of the world's population, growing from about 550 million people in 1949 to roughly 1.3 billion today. According to the Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment and Security, each person requires 50 liters of water per day for consumption and sanitation alone. If each person in China consumed the absolute minimum, that would amount to 62.5 billion liters of freshwater being used every day. China, and the rest of the world, for that matter, will very soon need to come to grips with a frightening reality: Due to a number of unfortunate circumstances, China simply will not have 62.5 billion liters to spare each day. Although a contributor, poor consumption habits on the part of the people are only one reason for the shortage. The problem stems largely from the very uneven rainfall distribution from which China suffers, and its horrific pollution troubles also compound the shortage. Generally speaking, the governmental policy regarding the environment on the whole is poor, which has created a number of corollary problems with relation to water. China's environmental protection apparatus is alarmingly bureaucratic, and recent steps that have been taken seem simply to be grandiose token projects that fail to address long-term issues, choosing instead to focus primarily on economic growth. The population is not expected to begin stabilizing before adding another 250 million people in the middle of the twentieth century; if Chinese environmental policy doesn't change, the water crisis promises to deliver consequences of catastrophic proportions.