

INDO-CHINA IMBROGLIO : LOOKING THROUGH THE PRISM OF BRAHMAPUTRA ISSUE

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Abstract : The proposed diversion of the Brahmaputra's water and a series of dam building at the upper reaches of it by China, that significantly alters the river's course and flow and creates water scarcity to downstream nations, have introduced ripples of anxiety in India and Bangladesh. The Brahmaputra water issue has the potential to be a source of an enduring discord between India and China at a time when the latter's intention is to make geopolitical advances in the northern sphere of the country, which has already escalated tension in the whole region. The worst affected downstream Northeastern Indian states like Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have urged the Central Government to take effective diplomatic steps to resolve the crisis. In such a situation the NDA government has taken several diplomatic steps. However, these efforts are not sufficient. Both the stakeholders must go beyond the narrow confines of self interested behaviour as co-operation may yield better results than rivalry in water insecurity related crisis. Regional political turmoil as well as territorial disputes should not impede the efforts to reach a consensual deal for addressing the shared water resources related problems.

Keywords : riparian, Brahmaputra River, Northeast India, NDA government.

Introduction

Rivers, a crucial source of water resources, which connect upstream and downstream users, are sources of political tussle between countries. Basically, the shared nature of rivers is responsible for much of these feuds. Thus water is becoming a key security issue in the Sino-Indian relations too, as much of India's river water originates in China. China being an upper riparian country and having control over the aqua rich Tibetan Plateau- the source of most major rivers of Asia, is in an advantageous position than India, as minimum percentage of its water resources comes from across its border. Quite contrarily according to UN figures, a total of 718 billion cubic metres of surface water flows out of Chinese territory yearly, of which 48.33 per cent runs directly into India

(Chellaney 2013). Therefore, India is in a disadvantageous position compared to China whose policy formulations are guided by her upper riparian status. China is now pursuing major inter-basin and inter-river water transfer projects on the Tibetan Plateau. This threatens to diminish international-river flows into India and other co-riparian states. There is no water treaty between India and China which also provides China with the opportunity to control international-river flows.

Backdrop

Due to over-utilisation of water resources by industries, its huge population and mismanagement of resources, China has embarked upon a series of dam-building and water-diversion projects to re-engineer the southward flow of river waters from the Tibetan Plateau. In fact, China has been damming most international rivers flowing out of Tibet, whose fragile ecosystem is already threatened by global warming. The only rivers on which no hydro-engineering works have been undertaken so far are the Indus, whose basin falls mostly in India and Pakistan, and the Salween, which flows into Burma and Thailand (Chellaney 2009). So China has water disputes with various countries, like in Mekong river Basin with Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Burma due to damming of the river upstream, in Brahmaputra river basin with India and Bangladesh, in Sutlej river basin with India and Pakistan, and so on (Chellaney 2007 : 59-60). So, there is no doubt that the Chinese hydro projects on the Tibetan Plateau are a major source of concern to China's neighbours including India. The Chinese projects in West-Central Tibet have a serious bearing on water flows in India.

Against this backdrop, the river in question in this study is the Brahmaputra. Among the rivers that cross the Sino-Indian border, the most significant is the Brahmaputra and it is also a source of serious conflict between the two countries that extends beyond the traditional territorial animosity between them. The rerouting of the river Brahmaputra and a series of dam building at the upper reaches of it by China, which significantly alters the river's course and flow and creates water scarcity to downstream nations is an issue of concern in this regard. The Brahmaputra water issue has the potential to be a source of an enduring discord between India and China at a time when the latter's intention is to make geopolitical advances in the northern sphere of the country which has already escalated tension in the whole region. However, China is damming not just the Brahmaputra, on which it has already completed several dams, but "it has also built a dam each on the Indus and the Sutlej and unveiled plans to erect a cascade of large dams on the Arun (Kosi) river, which helps augment downstream Ganges flows and is thus critical to India's ability to meet its treaty obligations vis-à-vis Bangladesh. The flash floods that ravaged Himachal and Arunachal states between 2000 and 2005 were

linked to the unannounced releases from rain-swollen Chinese dams and barrages”(Chellaney 2013). The present study will throw light on the following issues.

- How Brahmaputra remains at the top of India’s bilateral agenda with China recently and how the idea of diversion injects a new unfavourable element to the Sino-Indian relation;
- Why the water rivalry makes the age-old Sino-Indian border dispute less tractable;
- How the new Modi government is responding to the crisis and what are India’s possible diplomatic options to avert the water woes.

The Issues and Challenges Pertaining to the Problem

Both India and China are in want of stable water supply for their economic growth and development. In the face of growing power shortage in China and international pressure to reduce carbon emission, she is now focusing on generating hydro power that requires the building of dams. This is one of the reasons behind running major inter-river water transfer projects on the Tibetan Plateau by China which is a major concern for India. Previously China’s hydropower focus was on Yangtze River (across which the three Gorges Dam was built) and the Yellow River. Three water diversion Channels to the north are planned from Yangtze River to the Yellow river. After completion of them by 2050, a total of 44.8 billion cubic metres of water will be transferred by this manmade river (Dasgupta 2009: 140-141). However, the issue of more serious concern to India is China’s plans of diverting the Yarlung Sangpo or the Brahmaputra River that is originating in Chinese territory.

Geographically the Brahmaputra River flows through China, India and Bangladesh on its journey from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. It originates in south-western Tibet as the Yarlung Tsangpo River. In India, it is called Dihang (in Arunachal Pradesh) and Brahmaputra (in Assam) and in Bangladesh it is called Jamuna. Before entering India Brahmaputra flows eastward in Tibet for 2,200 kilometres at an average height of 4,000 meters, making it the world’s highest river. When two other tributaries merge with it, it becomes as wide as 10 kilometres in India before flowing into Bangladesh (SANDPR 2013). Therefore, this river is significant for India and the rerouting of the river northwards and damming of it by China are viewed with suspicion by her. She fears that such move is the projection of Chinese geo-political will to control water thereby affecting the economic growth and development of the downstream nations. Further, the water issue has exacerbated the political animosity between India and China over unsolved territorial border dispute between the two.

The Zangmu Dam that China is building is just the first of 28 dams that Beijing plans to build on the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet, including a hydel power generation plant at Zangmu on the middle reaches of the Brahmaputra, less than 200 kilometres from the

Indian border. China had initially denied that they were constructing a dam on the Brahmaputra river even after the contract was awarded. It was only in April 2010 that Yang Jiechi, the Chinese Foreign Minister, officially revealed that they were constructing the Zangmu Dam (Hussain). In January 2013 China's State Council has approved construction of three more dams on the Brahmaputra in Tibet in addition to the Zangmu that had previously been suspended as a result of environmental concerns and public opposition. According to the approval, a 640 MW dam will be built in Dagu, which lies 18 km upstream of Zangmu. Another 320 MW dam will be built at Jiacha, also on the middle reaches of the Brahmaputra downstream of Zangmu. A third dam will be built at Jiexu, 11 km upstream of Zangmu. The capacity of the Jiexu dam is, as yet, unconfirmed (Krishnan 2013). However, during an informal discussion between Indian and Chinese officials on February 5, 2013, China claimed that these projects would not affect the water flow of downstream areas in India. They assured that these are run of the river projects and would not affect the ecological balance of the region (Dikshit 2014). In spite of these assurances India is not satisfied and it is concerned more with the point of diversion rather than the issue of diversion. Specifically diversion of the Yarlung Tsangpo branch of the Brahmaputra around the famous U-Bend before the river enters India is a matter of concern for the country. It is at this Great Bend where China has plans to build the world's biggest hydropower project of 40 000 MW capacity and also divert water from here to the North China, though China is currently denying any such plans (Singh 2011: 180). The diversion of the River Brahmaputra will affect largely the North-eastern region of India as the amount of water in the Brahmaputra will fall significantly for this, affecting the region.

Northeast India- the hot spot

The Northeast region of India which accounts for a large share of total identified hydro potential of the country is dependent on the Brahmaputra basin. Large parts of the river flows through the Northeastern Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The river enters Arunachal Pradesh near Gelling where it is known as the Siang or Dihang. The total length of Siang River is 294.5 km till its point of confluence with Dibang and Lohit Rivers. The elevation of Siang river catchment area ranges from 90 meter to around 5800 meter. In India the total catchment of Siang river up to its confluence with Dibang is 14965.30 sq km. The Siang River meets two other major tributaries of Brahmaputra, Dibang and Lohit in the west of Sadiya, at a place named Kobo. From this confluence point, the river is known as the Brahmaputra till it enters Bangladesh. The river crosses Assam below Dhubri and enters Bangladesh where the river is known as Jamuna (SANDPR 2013). So in India especially in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, multiple smaller rivers join it to make it into a huge water resource. The water flow

before the river enters Arunachal Pradesh is about 60,000 cubic feet per second. It is fed by mostly fresh glacial water. But as the river crosses through Arunachal Pradesh, it receives additional water from its tributaries and then in Assam from the discharge of other streams. The one million cubic feet per second flow of the Brahmaputra during the rainy season is because of the topography of the land. All the rainfall in the Assam hills is discharged into this river making it at places about ten kilometres wide (Singh 2011: 183-184). Such geographical scenario has made the river so indispensable to both India and China. China is basically viewing it as a source of hydroelectric power generation and also as a source of water for China's parched mainland. But if China continues with its plan to build more dams on the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra, it would surely affect the downstream areas in Northeast India.

The water diversion project by China not only affects the natural landscape but impacts its economic well being also. The Northeastern state like Arunachal Pradesh which is a 'cornucopia' of natural resources is a target of China to fulfil its geo-political interest since long. In fact since 2006 the Chinese practice of describing it as Southern Tibet has provided basis to this suspicion. Water conundrum adds fuel to this problem. In the East Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh, a territory administered by India but claimed by China, people in the town of Pasighat reported that the usually strong river suddenly dwindled to almost nothing in early 2012. The state's Minister of Water Resources demanded an investigation into whether the shortage had been caused by dam building upstream on the Chinese-controlled portion of the river (Christopher 2013: 4). Although it is not clear what caused the sudden but temporary cessation of the Brahmaputra's flow in March of 2012, the political distrust between the two countries has made it clear that future water conflict over shared water resources like the river Brahmaputra is very much likely to take place.

As the Northeastern region is primarily dependent on agriculture, scarcity of water resources due to dam building would have an adverse impact on the economy of the region. Certain political parties and organizations of the region therefore, opposed vehemently to the building of mega dams on the Brahmaputra. The Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, the state closest to China, Nabam Tuki said on February 16, 2013 that "the three dams will affect the interest of people in the downstream areas. We will soon move New Delhi to take up this issue with China in the interest of the people" (The Hindustan Times 2013). Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi also requested the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to take up the matter concerning the construction of three dams on the Brahmaputra with China (The Assam Tribune 2013). According to Assamese experts, spearheading an awareness campaign against China's hydro-projects on the Brahmaputra is imperative to counter the proposed 85 percent water flow deficit

from China during the summer months (Hukil 2013 a.). Moreover, the Northeastern region has been identified as India's 'future powerhouse' where about 168 large hydroelectric projects have been proposed. This large number of projects in the region has the potential to majorly alter the rivers' patterns and the landscape along it. Therefore, large dams are emerging as a major issue of conflict in Northeast India. Many dams in the Arunachal Pradesh like Ranganadi Hydro Electric Project built by North Eastern Electric Power Corporation caused heavy floods during 2004, 2008, and 2011 in downstream Assam which resulted in loss of agricultural land thereby leading to displacement of residents. The Lower Subansiri Hydel project, to be constructed in the Subansiri River Basin which in turn is a major part of Brahmaputra River Basin has also provoked controversy (Basumatry 2013). In such a situation the rerouting of Brahmaputra by China at the upper reaches before it enters India has exacerbated these crises.

The Environmental Concerns

Environmental disasters due to the diversion of the river are another matter of concern. The Great Bend is located in an area of high seismic activity close to the fault line where the Indian plate collides against the Eurasian Plate. So the Chinese water diversion plan as part of the Western route of its South to North transfer project, could trigger great earthquake in the region (Chellaney 2011: 149). The negative environmental effects for the alteration of river course in this region are clearly articulated in the following lines:

"The Namch Barhwa (situated at the Great U-bend of the river) is decreasing by 3/4th of an inch every year. More so, the Yarlung-Tsangpo Suture Zone (YTSZ), a junction point between the Indian subcontinent and the Euro Asian plates is contracting. Since, the thrust of the suture is stronger around the Everest region and anaemic around the Sikkim-Arunachal region, the instability of basaltic salts, arsenic sedimentary deposits exacerbates. It has been verified that the eastern Himalayan mountain range, Sikkim and eastward, is made of loose soil and bears few rocks. Hence, no waterfalls are found in this region, making the entire region unsafe, unsuitable for dam construction and unreliable even for a run-of-the river (ROR) project." (Hukil 2013 b.)

The problem becomes more acute due to climate change induced glacial retreat. There is no doubt that water is a medium through which climate change affects the humanity severely. When shared water resource is the case in point, competition for access to it has exacerbated the situation. Therefore, if China keeps diverting water from its natural course, then Tibet will be a water scarce region in a few decades affecting both India and Bangladesh. Being the lowest riparian state of the Brahmaputra, the threat to Bangladesh is even greater. Bangladesh is very much concerned over water diversion of the Brahmaputra by China as well as about the building of dams by China and India on the Brahmaputra. She is in fear that such upstream activities by these two countries

would drastically reduce the amount of water reaching Bangladesh thereby, creating havoc to agricultural production and would aggravate environmental problems there. India and China have had several rounds of talks on the water issue since 2007. However, both the parties as well as the other stakeholders do not adequately respond to the environmental and political challenges posed by water conflicts. Even again in 2016, China blocked the Xiabuqu river, one of the many tributaries of the Yarlung Zangbo, to build a dam as part of the Lhalo hydroelectric project at Xigase in the Tibet Autonomous Region (Patranobis 2016). China is hardly aware of the environmental hazards that may take place due to water diversion. Specifically, climate change is rarely discussed in these trans-boundary water related talks and agreements. They are mostly unaware of the fact that future water supply and quality may be altered due to changing climate, hampering the reasonable sharing of water among the riparian states. Not only that, the sustainable management of shared water resources in a changing climate is also challenging as multiple political entities and actors involved may differ in their respective views.

Indian Responses to the Crisis under the New NDA Government

Undoubtedly water presents a new dimension to Indo-China relation which is already full of animosity due to territorial disputes, deep rooted mistrust, border tensions and so on. Such difficult political relationship renders the water issue more intractable. India views the reengineering of natural waterscape by China as a hydrological aggression against her which is as significant as the cartographic aggression against her. In Brahma Chellaney's words "China seems intent on aggressively pursuing projects on the Yarlung Zangbo and employing water as a weapon" (Yan 2013). Given the complex interplay between water issues and political relations between India and China, it is quite natural that border disputes between them may overshadow any cooperation on the water front. It is difficult to resolve water dispute without border resolution. However, efforts from both sides have been made time to time. There were several exchanges of state visits over Brahmaputra discourse by China and India during the UPA tenure. Prime Minister Manmohon Singh sought a joint mechanism with China to assess the construction work of dams on the river in a meeting with his Chinese counterpart on the sidelines of the BRICS summit of 2013 that would entail greater transparency, joint study of hydro-technical data, regular dialogue and revisions helping administrate the smooth functioning of the Brahmaputra river course. During the UPA government rule in India, the flood data agreement was also inked in May 2013, wherein China agreed to share hydrological data from June-October. Later in that year this agreement to extend hydraulic data of the Brahmaputra had been revised from the period of 1st June to 15th May till 15th October of each relevant year. This Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries provided an opportunity for both sides to strengthen cooperation on the trans-border

rivers by expert level exchange of hydrological information during the flood season and emergency management. The Manmohon Singh government accepted and appreciated Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's position in this regard (Hukil 2013c.). It had been argued at that juncture that such acceptance would not dilute India's preliminary proposal to institutionalise the set up of a joint bilateral mechanism between the two. From some quarters it was also argued that such Chinese proposition to share hydraulic information during the 'flood season' was a mere pacifier to India's increasing concerns over the dam construction along the Brahmaputra river.

The present NDA government under Narendra Modi has prioritised the improvement of India's ties with her neighbours. As a part of that gesture it has re-initiated talks with their counterparts in China. Brahmaputra issue still remains top of many bilateral agendas. Another MOU on flood data sharing has been signed during Indian Vice President Hamid Ansari's five day visit to Beijing which is based on two Memorandums of Understanding signed between the two countries in May and October, 2013 under the UPA government as mentioned earlier. This MoU on flood data sharing will provide India with 15 days more of hydrological data of river Brahmaputra. The data helps India in flood forecasting. India provides money for maintenance of three hydrological centres on the Chinese side. The data will be provided from May 15 to October 15 each year. This MoU will help the two countries establish a framework for regular interactions between administrative officials to share experiences and learn from each other's best practices (PTI 2014). According to the agreement, India would pay 850,000 yuan or roughly over Rs 82 lakh (one yuan equivalent to Rs 9.70) in US dollars every April to get data from the Nugesha, Yangcun and Nuxia observation stations. India has been getting data from China since 2002. But since 2008, it has been paying Beijing for the same. The money had been utilised by China to maintain the observation stations and pay the allowances of its personnel deployed there (PTI 2014). Despite the existence of such MOUs, the absence of water treaty between the two countries has made New Delhi's task all the more difficult in dealing with the issue. Narendra Modi's recent three day visit to China in May 2015 has generated expectations in India as another opportunity to broach the topic as part of wide ranging bilateral issues.

The most affected part of India due to the alteration of Brahmaputra river course would be the Northeast India. But these states are not satisfied with the pursued way of the central government in dealing with the issue. They think that there has not been enough indication that the concerns of the region that include China building mega dams on the Brahmaputra or even planning to divert the river, or the issue of people from Northeast India, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, being given stapled visas by China - were raised by India or accepted by the Chinese of their own as matters that need

consideration or re-consideration. Northeastern states like Assam have been raising the issue at regular intervals. Even the Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi has urged Prime Minister Modi to take up the issue of big dams coming up on the Brahmaputra with Beijing during his visit to China. But the Chief Minister was disappointed and blamed the Prime Minister for not raising the issue with utmost priority. According to him, “by not raising the serious issue and putting it on the backburner, the Prime Minister has done grave injustice to Assam and its people” (PTI 2015). The Central Government has also been blamed as the Brahmaputra River has not been properly utilized in India. Retired Colonel P. K. Gautam, research fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, adds that “if China builds a dam on the Brahmaputra now, and we complain about lesser water flows later, it could say that India doesn’t have any projects in the northeast.” (Kurup 2010). Arunachal Pradesh which borders China becomes significant in this regard as it has the highest potential for hydro power generation in India. India becomes more sceptical regarding Chinese Hydro engineering because of the slow pace of work on hydro-power projects awarded in Arunachal Pradesh. Her anxiety spurs from the fact that “out of Arunachal Pradesh’s estimated potential of unleashing 50,064 MW of power, less than 1 percent, or 405 MW, has been harnessed so far. This is in spite of the fact that 94 projects with a combined capacity of 41,502.5 MW have been allotted across eight river basins- all in Arunachal Pradesh-of Kameng, Subansiri, Tawang, Siang, Dibang, Lohit, Dikrong and Tirap”(Mukherjee 2013 : 30). So delay in using the full power generation potential of the river Brahmaputra may hamper India’s prior use claim. International Law has endorsed a country’s right over natural resources it shares with other nations if the country uses the resource first.

Concluding Remarks

Thus changes in the ‘physical or political setting’ of international river basins by ‘construction of a dam upstream, diversion for irrigation purposes, or realignment of political frontiers’ are responsible for fostering competition among co-riparians. India and China are not exceptions in this regard. The Brahmaputra dispute has created fissure in their bilateral relation. In order to avoid such water woes, India can pursue a regional tripartite water treaty with China and Bangladesh as without any ‘river-collaborative or transparency mechanism’ pertaining to the sharing and preservation of water resources between them, the problem cannot be resolved; India with other lower riparian like countries in the Mekong river and Sutlej River basins can built a common platform against China as they are also suffering due to the latter’s upstream activities. She can also make the resolution of Brahmaputra problem as a condition for her participation in the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar Cooperation); India must not limit the

use of Brahmaputra's water for hydro-power generation only but use its water for irrigation purposes as well. The multipurpose dam building for flood control and for irrigation may thus be conducive for the socio economic well being of the Northeastern region of India; and finally any project related to this river in the Northeastern region must not flout the environmental concerns as well because the region is already in the frontline of climate catastrophes. All these efforts can be materialised only if both India and China agree that water disputes could generally be resolved diplomatically, and shared water resources if properly maintained are more a source of cooperation and negotiation than a threat to the security architecture of individual country. From Indian side the implications for setting up an International Brahmaputra River Water Tribunal for arriving at an international water treaty, or constituting a Brahmaputra River Valley Authority to monitor the flow of the river on a regular basis to stop any secret Chinese intrusive activities are significant at this juncture. But these were hardly mentioned during the exchange of premier discourses over water issue in the recent past (Hukil 2013b.). It is now imperative to consider that although water is an issue in their bilateral talks, it needs to be given the same importance as the border issues in Indo-China diplomatic talks. Lack of bilateral strategic trust between the two countries basically has contributed to the deadlock in water cooperation. Countries therefore, must go beyond the narrow confines of self interested behaviour as cooperation may yield better results than rivalry in water insecurity related crisis. Regional political turmoil as well as territorial disputes should not impede the efforts to reach a consensual deal for addressing the shared water resources related problems. The fostering of effective diplomacy between them on sharing of trans-border river waters can only establish a new era of mutual trust and confidence in the region.

So it comes as no surprise that water, more specifically shared river water has become a significant issue of concerns for the co-riparians. The crucial nexus between water and food production as well as water and hydro power generation have turned the shared river basins into a battleground for competing claims over 'reasonable share of water'. Along with this, the initiation of a dam building race by the upstream parties ultimately makes water a significant medium of power projection and fostering competition within and between sovereign states. In this context Ismail Serageldin's much quoted prediction is worth mentioning- "If the wars of this century were fought over oil, the wars of the next century will be fought over water." (Shiva 2002 : IX). Although there is no such instance of overt war fought simply over water but this life sustaining resource has been an underlying factor in several armed conflicts in different regions. Sino-Indian bilateral relation has also been largely affected by such riparian rivalry which requires proper diplomatic interactions between them.

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