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A Check to China's Water Hegemony

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Abstract

"Upstream dams, barrages, canals, and irrigation systems can help fashion water into a political weapon that can be wielded overtly in a war, or subtly in peacetime to signal dissatisfaction with a co-riparian state." - Brahma Chellaney writes in Coming Water Wars.

Introduction

A good number of rivers originate in Tibetan plateau giving China the leverage over other downstream riparian states. Brahmaputra is one among those rivers where China is an upstream riparian state while India and Bangladesh remain downstream riparians. The upstream position, China has well used for its economic and political gains. So to say, to establish its water hegemony as an emerging super power. Be it Lalho dam project or the grand diversion project on Brahmaputra China has exploited the river to its maximum for its unquenchable energy thirst and for its unbeaten industrialization in the dry north. Brahmaputra is also its political weapon to curtail the hydro projects of India in Arunachal Pradesh that China claims South Tibet. It also serves as an instrument to black mail India in case of any breach by India against its staunch ally Pakistan in Indus Water Treaty. It is high time India garnered the grudges of all the downstream riparians against China and formed the great alliance to make China ink binding water treaties with the other riparian states. Not to mention India's long standing support to Tibetan Independence cause. India should also study the possible joint hydro ventures with China to check its water hegemony [1].

Water has moved to the top of the concern the countries need to worry about in the recent decades[1]. While the other natural resources can be exported when in surplus and imported in case of scarcity water cannot be done this way. The states have to be depended on its own geographical location for water or they can also get water from the foreign states through trans-boundary rivers. Tibetan plateau is an Asian spigot where originate more than ten major trans-boundary rivers. These rivers include the Brahmaputra, the Yangtze, the Mekong, the Sutlej, the Indus, the Salween, and the Huang Ho, which is also known as the Yellow River[2]. Being an upper stream riparian state China has the leverage over the downstream riparian states and has installed its water hegemony around the region.

The 21st century has seen a rapid industrialization in China. The engineering feats of China stand beyond any description. This has led the nation to unquenchable thirst for energy. Roughly about 20% of China's electricity is produced from hydro power[3]. These include the major hydro electrical projects along the rivers. Besides its need to quench its thirst for the energy and to feed its unbeaten industrialization China also has a water crisis. The World Bank has predicted that the water problem in China would result in the loss of 2.3% of its gross domestic product[4]. Though the country is facing the water crisis the country is still not under any water stress- a term internationally defined as the availability of less than 1,700 cubic meters of water per person per year[5]. According to United Nations the demand for fresh water has gone high at a very fast rate in recent years. Though China is home to 20% of world population, its fresh water availability is only 7%[6]. Again there is the problem of water sharing between the industrialized urban society and the agrarian rural society. The UN predicts that China's demand for fresh water will go high to the extent of 800 billion m^3. Due to overexploitation of water bodies and inefficient consumption water has become scarcer in China. According to 2013 report published by the Chinese authorities, the number of rivers in china has decreased from 50,000 to 23,000 in 2011 over a period of 20 years[7]. This has led China to tap all the possible resources to meet its increasing water demand. Till date China has constructed umpteen numbers of hydro projects along the major and small river basins. This it does without the consultation of the downstream riparian states. Brahmaputra which is known as Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet is no exception.

Originating in Tibetan plateau Yarlung Tsangpo crawls through the mountains of Tibet towards the east through the southern Tibet for a distance of 1625 kilometers to make a turn out at the Shuomatan Point or Great Bend before it enters India through Arunachal Pradesh where it is christened as Siang River [2]. There it collects its large share of water from different tributaries to reach Assam with the name Brahmaputra. Then it snakes idly towards Bangladesh where it is

1 Sino-Indian water disputes: the coming water wars? Hongzhou Zhang
2 http://theconversation.com/china-and-indias-race-to-dam-the-brahmaputra-river-puts-the-himalayas-at-risk-65496
3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hydroelectricity_in_China
4 http://nationalinterest.org/feature/water-war-river-could-sink-china-india-relations-15829
5 Ibid.
6 Sino-Indian water disputes: the coming water wars? Hongzhou Zhang
7 Ibid.

known as Jammuna and gets fused with the other two major rivers by name Ganges and Meghna to form the world's largest delta. Finally it empties itself in the Bay of Bengal[8].

With more than 50% of its basin based in China, it sees it as an opportunity to do whatever it wants to establish its water hegemony as it has not signed any water treaty with the downstream riparian states, India and Bangladesh. Guwahati based NGO alleges that China is building 26 hydropower dams on the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra in Tibet[9]. It further warns that if all these projects are over it will drastically affect the water flow in the river adversely affecting the lower riparians. One of the controversial dam projects is Lalho dam project in Xiabuqu tributary. This dam was built blocking the 195 km long Xiabuqu tributary. But this is not the first dam to be worried about. In 2010 China built Zangmu dam on the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra and later the approval to construct three more small scale projects at Dagu, Jiacha and Jeixu were given during the 12th five year plan from 2011-2015. Again in 2015 China started building the world's highest altitude hydropower station known as Zam hydropower station. Big scale hydropower project costs about $1.5 bn and could produce about 2.5 KW-hours of electricity a year. This raised the major concern in India about China's ability to release water in times of conflict[10]. India's major concern was not about building these dams but the manner China did construct these dams without consulting the countries in the lower reaches of the river. China besides an Expert Level Mechanism (ELM) on trans-border rivers has remained secretive with regards to its projects on Brahmaputra (Figure 1).

India is facing a huge water crisis [3]. According to the ministry of Water Resources per capita consumption of water in the country remain to its lower level of 1545 cubic meters as per the 2011 census which is lower than the international standard of 1700 cubic meters of water per person per year[11]. At this juncture India depends heavily on Brahmaputra to meet its water demands. For India the river accounts for 30% of fresh water resources and about 40% of total hydropower potential of the country[12]. So diverting the river water from the Great Bend to the dry north of China would cause great damage to middle and lower riparian states. Many environmental experts and analysts warn that China's diversion project may at the long run dry and would cause havocs to the millions of the people in the downstream[13]. Even the scientific community within china has warned the government about the non-feasibility of the project in the near future. But they have not denied the possibility in the distant future. With rapid engineering growth the near future may turn to be present in no time for China [4]. Thus the projects remain a threat to India and Bangladesh. Hongzhou Zhang the author of the article Sino-Indian water disputes: the coming water wars argues that the project intends only to intend 20% of total water flows from six rivers in the south west China which includes Mekong, Brahmaputra and the Salween rivers. He further says that even if 100% water flow is diverted it would not affect India much as the Indian part of the basin accounts for 39% of total water discharge while China with more than half spatial area falling within contributes only 22-30% water discharge. The major contribution is from Bhutan in terms of its less spatial area[14].

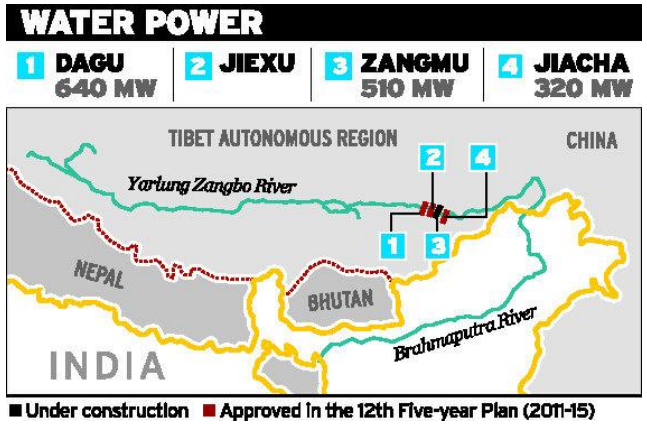

Figure 1: Brahmaputra river and its projects.

The major threat to India did not come through these hydroelectric projects or through other big and small scale dam projects but through the great diversion project at the Great Bend. What is this diversion project? Faced with dire water scarcity experts in 1952 proposed two major water diversion projects by name South-North Water Diversion Project and the Great Western Route Diversion Project. The former was proposed to transfer 44.8 mn cubic meters of water from the southern Yangtse river to Beijing and Tanjin in the dry north. The controversy arose with the latter project GWRD which involves installing a huge dam in the Great Bend of Brahmaputra and store that water to transfer to the dry north which is the most industrialized part of China[15]. This will have huge ramification over the lower riparian states Indian and Bangladesh which unlike China depend more on the Brahmaputra river to meet their water demands.

There have been differing opinions from Indian side with regard to the damming of Brahmaputra by China. Former Indian bureaucrat Ramesh Bhattacharji who has visited most of the damns in China argues that India has nothing to be worried about as these dams are on the tributaries which are not large reservoirs. He argues further that the rivers gets most of its water only after entering into India. That is to say that the heavy precipitation in India accounts for roughly 70 percent of water volume of the river. Former Secretary of Water Resources with the Government of India Ramaswamy Iyer, counter argues against the complacency [4]. He disputes the 30:70 ratio arguments saying that this applies only to the rainy season. Even 10% of water diversion would mean a big loss to the downstream countries[16].

8 http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/water-wars-china-india-and-the-great-dam-rush/

9 Water: The New Dimension in India-China Relations; Nazia Hussain

10 http://www.clearias.com/lalho-project/

11 http://nationalinterest.org/feature/water-war-river-could-sink-china-india-relations-15829 Water War: This River Could Sink China-India Relations Joel Wuthnow

12 Sino-Indian water disputes: the coming water wars? Hongzhou Zhang

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Water: The New Dimension in India-China Relations : Nazia Hussain

What troubles India more is China not signing any water agreement with India and its not sharing of the important data on the Brahmaputra river. Strategic affairs expert Brahma Chellaney warns neither that nor sharing of the data on the important occasion can give China an upper hand to use water as a political weapon[17]. Tansak Phosrikun, a Mekong river activist from Thailand says "When it comes to diplomacy, China uses rivers as a bargain chip."[18] China using water as a political weapon is very much from the example of China's overt support to Pakistan with regard to Indus River. The consul-general of China in Lahore is quoted as saying, "In case of any (foreign) aggression, our country will extend its full support to Pakistan."[19] China's aggressive announcement in the event of recent tension between India and Pakistan that it would dam the Brahmaputra if India breaches the Indus Water Treaty against its staunch ally Pakistan. The words of Tempa Gyaltsen, researcher at Tibet Policy Institute, "We don't know if India would ever use water as a weapon against Pakistan but China would not hesitate doing that against India. It would be surely used as a weapon and that is another major reason for the downstream countries of the 10 Tibetan rivers to come together and force China into a water treaty" serves as an alarm to India to see the possibilities to check the water hegemony of China in the sub-region.

Faced with unprecedented water crisis India is also building a lot of dams on the Brahmaputra River. China alleges that India is planning to build roughly around 160 dams to tap the water resources in Brahmaputra. It complains that India's green light to construct 3000 MW hydro project on the Dibang River in the disputed Arunachal Pradesh is lesser than China's Zangmu dam which has the capacity to produce up to 510 MW electricity[20]river may not yield good result to India as long as india builds dams on the river and as the Mighty giant China has the records of not listening to its neighbor and even the international agents in the past. It has so far not ratified the UN convention on Non Navigable Use of International Watercourses 1997. The reason it gives is three fold.

Firstly it feels that the 1997 UNWC underestimates the interest of the upper riparian states and overestimates that of the lower riparian states. It is against the idea of the upper riparian paying the compensation for the damage done by them by installing a hydro project. Secondly it strongly opposes the idea of sharing the data of the rivers. It argues that it involves the national security and sovereignty and sharing of the information may risk the security of the nation. For long data on land, air and water of a nation has not opened to domestic audiences, not to mention foreign countries [5]. Finally the 1997 convention demands third party involvement in case of any dispute among the riparian states which is against the China's long traditional bilateral relation. This clearly shows China's willingness to co-operate with the other riparian states and how China is less bothered about the concerns of the lower riparian states.

Rather than focusing more on China's damming of the river Brahmaputra India should focus on bringing China to the tables to ink binding treaties with the lower riparian states. Gifted with high altitude of glaciers Tibetan plateau is the fountain of many rivers including Brahmaputra, the Inuds, the Sutlej, the Salween, and the Mekong. The rivers feed around 2 billion people in 11 countries[21]. In all these rivers china is located on the upper reaches of the river giving it a leverage over the downstream riparian states. China going spree on damming the rivers has angered many of these downstream states.

Besides the complains and cry from the lower riparian states of Thailand and Myanmar China has tried unilaterally all the possibilities to construct about 13 damns on the Salween River. In 2004, many environmental and human right organizations protested a project of China on the Nu River yielding the government later to suspend the project. Later in the same year the two countries agreed to put up a joint venture of installing five hydro powered dams in the Salween River basin[22]. China has also refused to join the Mekong River Commission[23]. Though the country has taken unprecedented step to open up water cooperation with the lower riparian states on Mekong River basin like sharing dry season hydrological data and allowing Mekong country representatives to visit the dams in the basin especially the Jinghong dam[24] it has not pacified the anger of co-riparian states. Vietnam has for example for long opposed the unilateral decision of damming the basin without consulting the riparian states. The anger of Vietnam can also be explained in terms of its dispute with China in South China Sea [6].

Bangladesh the downstream country in the Brahmaputra river basin is the most affected by the damming of the river by both China and India the upper and middle riparian states respectively. Thus it is the strongest advocate of forming a basin wide management commission[25]. In an interview with Tariq Ahmed Karim, Bangladesh's High commissioner to India he suggests to form South Asian level water regulatory and monitoring body something like what India proposes, Himalayas Rivers Commission to better manage the water issues in the sub-region[26].

Be it Thailand and Myanmar from the Salween River basin or Vietnam from the Mekong River basin or Bangladesh from the Brahmaputra river basin, or other central Asian countries with whom China share its rivers, it is given to the capacity of India to garner all the grudges of the lower riparian states against China and the win the momentum to bring China to the legal tables to ink binding treaties with the co-riparian states. India should not hesitate to work with these countries to pressurize China to listen to their hue and cry. Thus the

16 http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/water-wars-china-india-and-the-great-dam-rush/

17 Ibid.

18 https://www.thequint.com/world/2016/09/24/if-india-can-rethink-indus-waters-treaty-china-too-has-water-as-a-weapon-pakistan-river-mekong-brahmaputra-tibet ; 'If India Can Rethink Indus Treaty, China Too Has Water as a Weapon'

19 Why China's move to block Brahmaputra tributary is actually linked to Balochistan: Vishnupriya Bhandaram

20 Sino-Indian water disputes: the coming water wars? Hongzhou Zhang

21 Water Wars: The Brahmaputra River and Sino-Indian Relations: Mark Christopher

22 http://www.transboundarywaters.orst.edu/research/case_studies/Salween_New.htm

23 http://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2010/jun/02/beijing-is-damming-yarlung-zangbo-120086.html

24 https://www.thethirdpole.net/2016/02/01/china-drives-water-cooperation-with-mekong-countries/

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26 Water: The New Dimension in India-China Relations: Nazia Hussain

way forward must be to form a great alliance of South and Southeast Asian countries that share the trans-border water resources in the region on the basis of Himalayan environment as a co-operational region[27].

This apart, China's bad boy attitude in the global arena has also gained a bad name for China. Its past record of not listening to the international organizations and the agents in many of the crucial issues bears witness to it. But at the same time unlike the past China due to its willingness to emerge as super power or its thirst to replace the USA as the super power wants to show itself as the problem solver rather than problem creator in the international politics. Thus creating an international cry against China with regard to its unilateral politics in using international rivers may come as handy. This China may consider it as a tint to its super power image and yield to sign agreements with its co-riparian states.

India also needs to be very diplomatic in its move to deal with China as to the trans-boundary rivers management. India needs to be practical to accept the fact that in cannot coerce China with its military prowess or black mail China not to do what it does now. Neither India can use its economic position to influence as long as the economic position is highly weighted in favor of China. Thus one of the alternatives to pushback China would be to play the political game with the card of Tibetan Independence cause[28]. This India has to play with utmost care as the subject is very much sensitive to China. Any miss movement by India may result in Frankenstein effect. India can well use of the strong bond between the people of Tibet and India from 1959 the time Thalai Lama quit the country and took refuge in India[29]. This long standing rapport is a good asset to New Delhi to influence China in this regard. India should not hesitate to work with the local Tibetan who opposes the damming of the Brahmaputra River in their Autonomous region due to ecological and political concerns [7].

At the last resort India should not hesitate to study the possibilities of joint ventures with China for the interests of the 2 billion people who are benefited from the Brahmaputra River basin. The successful story of joint ventures of Itaipu Dam between Brazil and Paraguay could serve as a good example of how disputing nations can come in to good terms with each other through joint ventures[30]. Again in the Salween river basin the long disputing nations China and Thailand came in to good terms through the joint venture of hydro-powered dams. It was a joint venture between China's largest hydropower company, Sinohydro Corporation and Thailand's electricity utility, EGAT, to develop the Hatgyi Dam[31]. Thus learning from the examples around the globe China and India should explore the possibilities of joint venture for the interest of people who live along the basin.

Conclusion

Water is the rarest resource that cannot be replaced by any other natural resource. It can neither be imported nor be exported. It is the natural gift each nation is blessed with. Some are given more while unfortunately some others are given less leaving them to depend on the trans-boundary rivers. This does not mean to say that those nations who are blessed with more water and those nations hosts the trans-boundary rivers have to look down upon the other nations who depend on them to meet their water demands. The upper riparian states should not underestimate the interests of the lower riparian states. True indeed India and China are in dire need of water as the two Asian giants are on the verge of rapid industrialization. Their demand for fresh water has gone ever high in the recent history. Both of them depend on the Brahmaputra river to meet their fresh water demand. While the dependency of China on the Brahmaputra river is very much limited as China hosts many other trans-boundary rivers that snakes through the land of China, India's 30% of fresh water demand is met by the Brahmaputra river. Further Bangladesh's dependency on the river is a sorry state. Thus any miss management of water on the upper reaches of the river is highly damageable to the lower riparian states. China should stop acting unilaterally and open up for water co-operation with its co-riparian states in terms of legal agreements. It should not neglect the interests of the lower riparian states when blocking the flow of the river with its huge hydro projects. An introspective study is needed for the China to listen to the words of Wang Shucheng, China's former minister of Ministry of water Resources who believes, "solutions to China's water problems lie in the development of a water-sustaining society and water diversion projects are not only costly but also aggravate current ecological and relocation problems."

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