India-China Riparian Relations: Of Reality and Rationality

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Introduction

When a subject is highly controversial, as water issues tend to be, the truth often gets blurred. Lies, misperception and differing interpretation make water relations contentious both at the transboundary and provincial levels. Rivalry over water is age-old and is actually built into our language. In fact the word rival derives from Latin *rivalis,* originally meaning 'person using the same stream as another'. The phrase to 'sell someone down the river' means to betray someone. It is increasingly becoming clear that water cannot be understood in isolation from a variety of broader contextual issues – particularly energy security, food security, as also wealth generation. The internal water challenges that states are rapidly going to encounter will greatly impact the transboundary water issues.

Riparian relations are underpinned by varied interpretations of the use of river water and the differing claims. Upper riparian nations essentially base their claims on "absolute territorial sovereignty", i.e. the right to use rivers unilaterally. The lower riparian, on the other hand, claim "absolute territorial integrity" of rivers, stressing that upper riparian actions should not affect the water flowing downstream. The two claims are incompatible. There are, however, accepted legal norms of "equitable utilisation", "no-harm rule" and "restricted sovereignty" that riparian states work through, and frame negotiations and treaties accordingly to overcome such differing positions. But more often than not, these norms in power dynamics are rendered meaningless. With state interest overriding legally binding international treaty, riparian relations are thus largely influenced by the prevailing political dynamics and strategic considerations. What quite clearly emerges in the river basins is a hydropolitical

security complex in which states are part hydrological owners and part technical users of rivers. In this security complex, to what extent factors like distribution, quality and competing uses contribute to domestic or regional water insecurity is critically important to peace and stability in Asia.

Rivers are complex socio-natural realities that invariably get entangled with politics. India and China, two big and powerful riparians, offer an interesting account of hydro-behaviour and hydro-politics. The two not only share rivers between their neighbours but also significantly have transboundary rivers flowing between them. The political framing, thus, is whether there will be elements of cooperation and understanding between the two or whether there will be uneasiness and unsettlement on the shared rivers. Another dimension to this framing is that shared rivers are an extension of the broader strategic interaction in which China and India compete, contest and cooperate.

China's hydrological position is one of complete upper riparian supremacy. According to the Ministry of Water Resources, China shares more than 50 major international watercourses with its downstream riparian neighbours that include 13 directly bordering countries and three close neighbour countries.[1] China's riparian neighbours are North Korea, Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan occupied Kashmir, Afghanistan, India and Vietnam. An interesting fact to note is that less than one per cent of water comes from outside China's territory, while the volume of water flowing out of China is about 730 billion cubic metres (bcm).[2] This is a huge strategic asset that can be translated into political leverage and bargaining with the downstream neighbouring countries. With water as a tool and an instrument, China quite effectively mixes 'coercion and compliance' with 'attraction and intimidation', what the Marxist political philosopher Antonio Gramsci famously termed "a mix of force and consent."

In contrast, India is simultaneously an upper and lower riparian. Some figures indicate that about 354 bcm of water flow into India from Tibet of which the annual average flow in the Brahmaputra is 78.10 bcm. India's lower riparian position increases its dependency (and thus water insecurity) on the

headwaters of the rivers such as Indus, Sutlej and Brahmaputra which originate in the Tibetan plateau. While China has no water sharing treaties or agreements on its transboundary rivers, India, has entered into water sharing treaties with its lower riparian countries Pakistan (Indus Waters Treaty of 1960) and Bangladesh (Ganga Treaty of 1996).

China's per capita water resources in 2013 was just over 2,000 cubic meters with overall water availability at nearly 2.8 trillion cubic metres.[3] The average annual per capita availability of water in India as per the 2011 census was 1545 cubic metres with utilisable water resources of only 1123 bcm, which is likely to be 1093 bcm by 2025.[4] While both China and India are currently in high water stress category, it is projected that by 2040 both will be in the top 50 water scarce countries.[5] Currently, both countries face wide ranging challenges including deteriorating water quality, uneven distribution of water resources in space and time and inefficient utilisation. The critical difference between the two countries is that China is far more water secure while India receives a large portion of its water from outside its territory and hence water dependent.

China Legacy of Hydro-Control and Supremacy

China has a legacy of control and dominance of rivers. The history of the Chinese civilisation is in many ways a history of hydraulic engineering, canal-building and water conservation. Yu, the Great, who founded the Xia dynasty, the first dynasty under traditional Chinese around 2200 BC, had a mythical status that came from his ability to manage the Yellow river. 'Whoever controls the Yellow river controls China' is a timeless maxim. Yu demonstrated for 11 years how to tame the Yellow river by incorporating local knowledge and participation to successfully divert the flow to the sea. Interestingly, Yu's father, Gun had failed in his attempt to control the floods of Yellow river and was executed. Wu, the Han (141-87 BC) deemed as the greatest Han emperor, who expanded the territory, realised in the end the futility of war and expansion and diverted his attention to agriculture and irrigation.

Mao Tse-tung, one of the most remarkable personalities of the 20th Century, who once commented that he was "part monkey,

part tiger", established the People's Republic of China in 1949 and transformed it into a modern industrialised socialist state. In 1950, Mao issued a directive, *The Huai River Must Be Harnessed* that entailed constructing a new route for the river to the sea in order to mitigate flooding. It was an audacious plan but for Mao it was a "triumph of political mobilisation over seemingly overwhelming obstacles"[6] or as he would often state "nature is an enemy that had to be beaten" and that "man must conquer nature". Mao reclaimed the hydraulic mind-set, portraying it as the courage of the leader and the struggle of the labouring people against the elements of nature.[7] Systematically since 1950, Mao's leadership created a hydraulic society, with control of water supply for irrigation as the basis of the Chinese mode of production and of a powerful, exploitative bureaucracy.[8]

Rivers are not only territorial but status seeking and symbolise political supremacy. When Mao looked at Tibet he saw the mighty rivers flowing from the landscape and made a seemingly innocent remark: 'the south has a lot of water, the north little … if possible, it is ok to lend a little water'.[9] Since then it has spawned a whole breed of Chinese leadership who think hydrologically. Without Tibet, China's hydrological supremacy would be overturned. It would go from being entirely water-independent to being water-dependent. Had it not been for Tibet, China would not have been the world's most independent riparian country. In fact, Beijing's total control over Tibet in effect is its 'total' control over the water resources. Over 60 per cent of China's current leaders have engineering backgrounds with deep interest in mega-water projects.

An example of this is, the South-to-North Water Transfer Project from Tibet got under way in 2002, and is expected to take more than 50 years to complete, making it the world's largest hydropower project ever. The project involves drawing 44.8 bcm of water from the southern rivers in Tibet and linking it to mainland China's four main rivers – Yangtse, Yellow, Huaihe and Haihe – through three diversion routes – the eastern, central and western.[10] The eastern and central routes are now functioning and the rivers that have been linked are within the territory of China, but the western route, which factors diverting the transboundary

rivers including the Yarlung/Bramaputra at the 'Great Bend' is controversial and of concern to India. Currently, the feasibility of the central project is being studied but more importantly the political cost is being determined as any diversion would mean disturbing relations with downstream countries. However, China will never say it officially. Diversion will always create fear and apprehension and, hence, maintaining a strategic silence on the diversion plan is a strategic choice.

In the context of water diversion and with the US rebalancing of Asia, it is important to observe President Xi Jinping speech in the Boao Forum in April 2013. Xi asserted that China "While pursuing its own interests, a country should accommodate the legitimate concerns of others…We need to work vigorously to create more cooperation opportunities, upgrade cooperation, and deliver more development dividends to our people and contribute more to global growth."[11] It is a well calibrated political messaging, emphasising China as a benign power and respecting peaceful co-existence. In reality, however, China's emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity is far more pronounced than mutual benefit on managing its transboundary waters. It is a conundrum that will define how China balances its domestic water needs with its 'good neighbour' policy.

For China, water is immensely strategic. Its internal stability depends a lot on the stable supply of water and it is unlikely that China will compromise on its water resources. Given this reality, India has to rationally view its downstream status. Hydrological facts and objective data-based analysis will be important in its calculation and not a generalised fear hypothesis that China will 'water bomb' us by controlling the flow of the Brahmaputra. Informed science is a good starting point for India to build its capability and capacity on the Brahmaputra and in the process de-emphasise China as a hydro-hegemon. The reasons are explained below.

Brahmaputra is ours to Develop

The Brahmaputra originates from the Angsi Glacier in the Burang County of Tibet, where it is known as the YarlungTsangpo. The total length of the river from the source to the mouth is 2,880 km,

of which 1,625 km flows through Tibet, 918 km traverses India and the rest 337 km in Bangladesh. On the face of it, since 56 per cent of the river flows in the Chinese territory one can be easily mistaken to believe that China controls the large share of the water. However, and this is an important fact, the volumetric of the Yarlung/Brahmaputra is not proportional to its length inside a country. The Yarlung is a trans-Himalayan river where precipitation averages about 300 mm annually. Once it crosses the Himalayan crest line, the annual precipitation reaches about 2000 mm.[12] Translated, this means that the Yarlung when it reaches India's territory and becomes the Brahmaputra, it swells and becomes mightier because of the heavy monsoon rain and spring water and also the contribution of the fast flowing tributaries the Luhit, Dibang and Siang/Dihang. Peer reviewed data clearly suggest that both, during the lean and peak flow, the total annual outflow of the Yarlung from China is significantly less than the Brahmaputra. This means that India has ample water on its side to develop and harness.

India needs to have more water development footprints in Arunachal to enhance economic growth in the region particularly building more water storages and thereby exert down riparian prior appropriation rights. It must not be forgotten that China's claim to the Arunachal territory (South Tibet) is also a claim to the vast amount of water flowing in the area. Greater economic integration in the border region is an effective way to neutralise China's claim. Of course the hydro projects in Arunachal, apart from being scientifically sound and technologically robust, need to be framed in a cooperative and consultative manner with wider stakeholder and inter-provincial participation in the north-east particularly with Assam which is downstream to Arunachal. It will be counter-productive for India to create upstream and downstream acrimony within its own territory. Equally significant is the 1800-km of potential waterways and navigation in the northeast, which unfortunately has been much ignored. With the current government's investment on inland waterways, the Brahmaputra National Waterway 2 would act as a critical economic corridor with direct access to Chittagong Port in Bangladesh and the Haldia Port in West Bengal and boost trade with Southeast Asian countries.

There are ways to pursue positive interactions on the Brahmaputra exclusive of China and more significantly de-emphasising China. An important element of India's hydro-diplomacy would be to initiate a lower riparian coalition stretching from the Ganga-Meghna-Brahmaputra to the Thanlwin / Salween and Mekong basins. One such calculation can be to consider strongly a multi-basin treaty on the Brahmaputra with Bhutan and Bangladesh. The sub-regional groupings like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) can act as a catalyst. Whether it is tourism, culture, transport and communication, rivers can be a force multiplier. More than knee-jerk counter-responses, India needs to think of cohesive engagement. The Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and the government's recent initiatives to expand the areas of cooperation among the member countries that includes Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are vital to the sustainability of India's Act East Policy.

At the diplomatic front India needs to bring the transboundary rivers with China as a core issue in bilateral discussions. This space is important to provide the political push for the two countries to think of mitigating risks and sharing benefits on the Yarlung/Brahmaputra and Sutlej. India's downstream position increases its vulnerability to China particularly in flood season. There are also huge concerns of natural disasters like glacial lake outburst flood that happened on the Pareechu river in 2005 leading to enormous damage downstream in Himachal Pradesh. China has always been reluctant to discuss water issues but the onus is on India to frame the water agenda beyond the volumetric and bring in larger environmental conventions like climate change, wetland protection, and biodiversity to the table. This will help in adding fresh perspective and practicality to the MoU that India has with China on data sharing and emergency situation.

Conclusion

India is not one-river downstream with China and thus India's riparian relations with China are exceptional and critical. India is multi-river dependent with the Brahmaputra on the East and the Indus and the Sutlej on the West. The Ganga which originates in

India has nine tributaries joining it from Nepal, three of which Karnali, Gandaki and Kosi arise in Tibet. The geographical reality of China being the upper riparian cannot be changed but India's lower riparian position does not necessarily mean acute disadvantage. China in recent years has changed the narrative of engagement with greater strategic partnership including the OBOR and Maritime Silk Road as well as deep economic ties and investment. China will be far more willing to discuss water concerns of the lower riparian countries than it did in the past. India's strategic and policy initiatives on the subject of Brahmaputra has to be carefully balanced between pursuing a 'water dialogue' with China and an emphasis on 'basin approach' with Bangladesh and Bhutan on the Brahmaputra.

Endnotes

[1] International Cooperation on Transboundary Rivers between China and its Neighbouring Countries, Ministry of Water Resources, People Republic of China, April 2015, p.2. See, http://www.mwr.gov.cn/english/mainsubjects/201604/P020160406513798903048.pdf. Also see, the National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, http://www.stats.gov.cn/

[2] Ibid., p.2

[3] Ibid., p.2

[4] Ministry of Water Resources, Government of India, http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=119797

[5] India Water Portal, http://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/what-does-being-water-stressed-mean-india-and-her-neighbours

[6] Thayer Watkins, *"The Control of the Huai River System in China",* see, http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/huairiver.htm

[7] Uttam Kumar Sinha, "Examining China's Hydro-Behaviour: Peaceful or Assertive?", *Strategic Analysis,* 36(1), 2012, p. 45

[8] See, Karl Wittfogel, Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Power, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957

[9] Cited in James Nickum, 'The Status of the South to North Water Transfer Plans in China', at http://hdr.undp:org/en/reports/global/hdr2006/papers/james_nickum_china_water_transfer.pdf.

[10] Water Technology, https://www.water-technology.net/projects/south_north/

[11] Full text of the speech, http://www.china.org.cn/business/Boao_Forum_2013/2013-04/10/content_28501562.htm

[12] JayantaBandyopadhyay, Nilanjan Ghosh and ChandanMahanta, “IRBM for Brahmaputra Sub-basin”, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Monograph_IRBM-for-Brahmaputra_Z-Final.pdf, pp.8-9

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