

Teesta River Turning into A National Security Issue from A Water Dispute for India

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Introduction

Bangladesh and West Bengal have both experienced a change in government, and it has been nearly two to three months since the new governments assumed office. Furthermore, the socio-political dynamics do not align well between the incumbent parties. Since Bengal's CM came to power, she has been working relentlessly to address his people's needs and maintain internal security; meanwhile, Tarique Rahman, Bangladesh's newly elected Prime Minister, has adopted a 'Bangladesh First' policy¹. Both share a commitment to putting people first. However, how can this objective be achieved without meaningful dialogue on the long-pending Teesta River project, which affects the lives and livelihoods of millions? Rahman's visit to China raises serious concerns for India because China will now help with the billion-dollar Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TRCMRP)², which requires considerable expertise and funding for feasibility studies, river dredging, and building extensive embankments to manage floods and maintain the continuous flow of water in northern Bangladesh during its dry season.

What was primarily a bilateral water-sharing issue has, therefore, begun to acquire a wider strategic dimension, particularly with China's growing involvement in the project and the sensitive geography surrounding India's eastern and northeastern regions.

Bangladesh's Perspectives and China's Gain

Why is TRCMRP so important for Bangladesh? It is important because of its implications for livelihoods. The project includes land reclamation, dam construction, road development, irrigation systems, tourism infrastructure, and special economic zones. It also envisages strengthening embankments, reclaiming 171 square km of land, constructing 82 jetties, and building 224 km of roads.³. Bangladesh chose China for this project because of a long-standing standoff with India and its need for significant assistance with funding and expertise.

Bangladesh's principal argument is that if India is free to pursue agreements with other countries to further its national interests, then why cannot Bangladesh do the same? It is not the case that there have been no discussions between China and Bangladesh in the past. A memorandum of understanding was signed in 2016 between the Bangladesh Water Development Board and PowerChina to prepare a feasibility study and a master plan for the project. By 2020, however, the project had been approved and announced as a mega river restoration initiative, but the then Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, withheld final approval for funding and implementation.⁴

Bangladesh and China can now better coordinate and project their narratives in multilateral forums. But what does China stand to gain from this arrangement? Beijing is not an open-handed or altruistic power. Both China and Bangladesh are aware of the direct security implications of this deal for India. It also provides China with an opportunity to advance its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while enhancing its ability to monitor the strategically significant 22-km-wide Siliguri Corridor, commonly known as the 'Chicken's Neck'.

The strategic concern for India, therefore, does not arise from the river-management project alone. It emerges from the convergence of geography, infrastructure and growing Chinese involvement in Bangladesh. The Teesta basin lies relatively close to the Siliguri Corridor, while expanding Chinese participation in infrastructure and connectivity projects gives Beijing a larger economic and technological footprint in the region. Although such projects are primarily developmental, their proximity to strategically sensitive areas could create concerns regarding dual-use infrastructure, information gathering and enhanced situational awareness. It is this convergence that has the potential to transform a bilateral water-sharing dispute into a wider national-security concern for India.

Backfiring on India

Recent developments highlight China's rapidly expanding engagement with Bangladesh. Rahman's visit was not only confined to TRCMRP but also permitted China to be involved in the Mongla port, which is approximately 188 km away from Kolkata. Such involvement could provide China with an opportunity to deploy advanced maritime surveillance systems to enable it to monitor strategic movements in the Bay of Bengal. A significant Chinese presence exists in the Rangpur Division, and they have been involved in building roads, bridges, and power plants, which support tourism and small businesses.⁵ Alongside this, the rise of the extremist group Jamaat has fostered identity-based divisions, undermining the shared cultural and historical ties that have traditionally bound the peoples of South Asia.

What led Dhaka to distance itself from the Indian subcontinent? One crucial factor is the growing prominence of identity politics in both India and Bangladesh. Bangladesh, whose pride lies in the 'Bangla' identity, has been reduced to a religious attribute. In India, political discourse has often highlighted the success of repatriation initiatives, but the numbers have made little difference; instead, political rhetoric on both sides has fuelled mistrust and dissent. Another factor is India's support for Sheikh Hasina, who had previously assisted India on several issues despite maintaining engagement with China. Delhi's inability to deliver on its commitments, ranging from Mongla Port to the Teesta agreement, which has remained stalled since 2011 because of opposition from West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, has contributed to Bangladesh's growing engagement with China. For example, the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka was reportedly first offered to India for operation, as was Mongla Port, but China took over full operations in 2017 under a 99-year lease because of India's negligence.⁶

Nevertheless, the Hambantota experience should not be treated as a direct parallel to developments in Bangladesh. The political, financial, and contractual circumstances are different; its relevance lies primarily in demonstrating how prolonged delays by one strategic partner can create opportunities for another.

According to strategic expert Tara Kartha, these recent developments are contentious on two fronts, as Pakistan, China and Bangladesh are seeking to exploit emerging vulnerabilities. Researchers at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) have warned that growing Chinese involvement in the Teesta issue could add a geopolitical and security dimension to what has traditionally been a bilateral water-sharing dispute.⁷

India's Stance

Past dialogues remained inconclusive because of differences between the two sides. From 2011, when West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee opposed the proposed agreement, to 2024, when India offered USD 1 billion in financing, political developments repeatedly disrupted progress..⁸ Despite diplomatic tensions, cross-border economic activities continued. Passenger bus services resumed after an 18-month gap, while during the Middle East conflict, India assisted Bangladesh by ensuring the continued supply of emergency fuel. As the Rangpur Division is undergoing demographic transformation due to recent developments, the movement of people across the border requires closer monitoring.

The Bay of Bengal is rapidly emerging as the next strategic flashpoint. Military partnerships, port infrastructure, and regional alliances are evolving with every move, reshaping the balance of power. Therefore, strategic and military developments in the Bay of Bengal need to be closely monitored.

For India, developments in the Teesta basin, the Siliguri Corridor and the Bay of Bengal cannot be viewed entirely in isolation. Together, they form part of a wider strategic environment in which Chinese economic engagement, infrastructure development and regional connectivity increasingly intersect with India's security interests.

Randhir Jaiswal, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson, told Asian News International that India had conveyed their views on the TRCMRP project to Dhaka, and future actions would be determined in light of evolving issues and developments.⁹ On the contrary, the MEA did not comment on the corridor and port but assured that it would keep a close watch on ongoing and future activities. Last month, Dinesh Trivedi, the new High Commissioner to Dhaka, was promoted to cabinet rank to reset ties with Bangladesh.¹⁰

Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether similar initiatives will be undertaken by Japan and the United States along the Mekong River, where China operates a large number of hydropower, multipurpose and irrigation projects. The TRCMRP could also expose Bangladesh to concerns over debt sustainability, an issue associated with some

Chinese-funded infrastructure projects elsewhere. Still, in complex global politics, development requires openness, whereas security often demands secrecy. So, India needs to continue talks with Bangladesh on the sharing of Teesta waters. The Teesta dispute demonstrates how domestic political constraints, prolonged diplomatic differences and growing great-power competition can transform a bilateral resource-sharing issue into a wider strategic concern. India's long-term objective should therefore be to prevent the securitisation of Teesta through sustained dialogue with Bangladesh, timely delivery of commitments and greater attention to Dhaka's legitimate developmental requirements.

Endnotes

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¹⁰ Jalali, Ujwal, "India to Factor Bangladesh-China Developments into Teesta Approach", *The Tribune*, accessed 03 July 3, 2026. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/india-to-factor-bangladesh-china-developments-into-teesta-approach/>

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