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The Weaponization of Water in Multipolar Asia: China's Belt and Road Initiative and Hydro-Strategic Rivalry in the Brahmaputra Basin

Nikita Chauhan[1]

Abstract:

Water is now quickly becoming a strategic element in international politics especially in Asia which has numerous major rivers and are cross-boundary. This paper explores the increasing 'weaponization of water' along the Brahmaputra River basin in the framework of Belt and Road Initiative of the Chinese and emergence of hydro-strategic competition in a multipolar Asian region. Brahmaputra, also referred to as the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet, is a river that has had its source in China, but is flowing in India, and supporting millions of people in Bangladesh. The dam building activities in China that are upstream, a lack of transparency, and the lack of a binding water-sharing treaty have fuelled downstream apprehensions about water security, the risk of floods, and the river water flow may be diverted. This paper examines how river hydropower infrastructure, data management, climate change and geopolitical rivalry is turning the river into a means of statecraft. Through the examination of current literature, policy reports and current events, the paper has realized the deterioration of water governance and mistrust over the strategy as a cause of a rising tension in the region. Simultaneously, the study holds that the Brahmaputra basin is equally an opportunity to collaborate, particularly by sharing data, by multilateral institutions, and by multilateral collaboration in terms of climate. The paper concludes that, in the absence of better regional governance, the geopolitical rivalry, caused by water insecurity, can intensify, yet cooperative structures can turn the river into a tool of regional stability and common development.

Keywords: Water Weaponization, Hydro-Politics, Brahmaputra River, Belt and Road Initiative, Water Security, Regional Cooperation.

[1] Research Student, 4th Year, Ramlal Anand College, University of Delhi

Introduction

Water is one of the strategic resources that have become 21st century strategic resources. The world is experiencing rapid population growth, urbanisation, industrialisation and climate change putting considerable strains on the amount of freshwater. This problem is more of an uphill task in Asia since most of the large rivers of the region cross-cut national borders. This has meant that water is no longer an environmental or developmental concern anymore, but a geopolitical, security and diplomatic one.

The best among these transformations is observed in the Brahmaputra River basin. The river is formed in the east part of the Tibetan plateau in China, passes through the northeastern part of India and ends in Bangladesh where it unites with the Ganga-Meghna River system and empties into the Bay of Bengal. The system of rivers sustains the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people, drinking water, hydropower generation, biodiversity, and agriculture. Due to its geographical positioning as well as economic significance, the Brahmaputra basin has emerged as a hot- bed of hydro-strategic rivalry.

The term 'weaponization of water' has been growing in popularity in recent years among researchers and policymakers as a means of states to gain strategic advantage by having control over water resources. This is not necessarily a direct struggle. Rather, it describes acts like the construction of dams, regulating the flow of rivers, restriction of data disclosures and the diplomatic use of water deals. In transboundary rivers, the upstream countries have a natural advantage since they have control on the origin of the river and also its flow. Such geographical phenomenon commonly brings about power imbalances and distrust among the neighbouring states.

The intense contact of water in geopolitics is directly related to the emerging multipolar Asian order. The rise in economic and strategic power of China and India is some of the new centres of power emerging in Asia. This fluctuating geopolitical environment has seen infrastructure building, connection and security of resources take the centre stage in national policies. This was especially the case with the Belt and Road Initiative which was initiated by China in 2013. The project is on the development of large-scale infrastructure networks- such as roads, railways, ports and hydropower plant in Asia and elsewhere. Although the BRI is usually framed as a connectivity and development project, there are also significant geopolitical implications to the project.

Construction of dams and hydro power plants by China on the upper part of the Brahmaputra has brought up concerns to the Indian and Bangladesh. Downstream nations are concerned that there may be upstream

dominance over water flows that may impact the agricultural sector, heighten flooding effects and cause chronic water insecurity. Concurrently, China posits that these initiatives are crucial in increasing renewable energy, economic growth and alleviation of poverty among the Tibetans. These conflicting accounts emphasize the interaction between the environment, security and development within transboundary river basins which is complex.

The paper discusses the issue of the Brahmaputra basin being an emerging location of hydro-strategic competition in a multipolar Asia. It examines the nexus of water and infrastructure along with geopolitics within the context of the dam construction done by China and the Belt and Road Initiative. Concerns of India and Bangladesh, the effects of climate change, and lack of proper regional governance mechanisms is also analysed by the study. In thus doing so, the paper will attempt to demonstrate how water is becoming more of a tool of statecraft- and how cooperation indeed is a requirement, and not an impossibility.

Literature Review

The concept of hydro-hegemony is one of the most critical theoretical concepts in the literature. According to Zeitoun and Warner (2006), power asymmetry, instead of an open conflict, is an often-used method by upstream states to have control over shared rivers. They demonstrate that more powerful states are able to influence water governance through political power, economic power, and technological power. The other theme is the connection between water and security that is another crucial theme in the literature. The first efforts of Gleick (1993) presented the concept of water as a source of conflict and a strategic weapon. Subsequently, the idea of water security was created by Grey and Sadoff (2007) who demonstrated that the management of water is directly associated with economic development, political stability, as well as regional collaboration.

Studies of the dam-building policy in China have increased considerably over the past few years. Magee (2013) explains the hydropower development of China as an extension of a larger initiative of ensuring energy and water security towards long-term development. In this view, the construction of dams is predominantly motivated by domestic interests like generation of electricity and economic development. Conversely, scholars maintain that the dams of the Yarlung Tsangpo give China an opportunity to have a geopolitical advantage over the countries that lie down the river, especially India.

The introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative has introduced a new aspect to hydro politics. Scholars state that it is not only an economic project but also a geopolitical plan to increase the influence of China

in the region. The Chinese water infrastructure projects tend to integrate the purposes of development with diplomatic activity and establish the new patterns of regional cooperation along with the dependency. Scholars state that infrastructure diplomacy is changing power dynamics in South Asia, where India and China are starting to rival over power. Such studies underscore the changes in the Brahmaputra basin into a broader strategic environment influenced by the infrastructural and connection initiatives.

Scholars argue that the Brahmaputra is to be perceived as a security and strategic problem, but not as an environmental or developmental problem (Sinha, 2013). Sinha points out that the constructions of dams upstream by China make strategic unpredictability to India due to the lack of their formal water sharing treaty and the lack of data transparency. The real issue of India is not the immediate diversion of water to China but the long-term strategic advantage that infrastructure and data control can give to China as suggested by Sinha. He further adds that water conflicts in the area have a strong connection with other geopolitical suspicions and other unsettled border conflicts. Notably, Sinha claims that India needs to react by a coordinated effort of domestic water infrastructure, diplomacy, and regional collaboration. His work brings out the fact that water governance is now a national security planning in South Asia.

In spite of the increasing number of researches, certain gaps are still present. A large part of the literature addresses the issue of water disputes either through the lens of security or through the lens of the environment, yet there are fewer works that combine hydro politics with the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and the emergence of multipolar Asia. Limited studies are also done concerning the fact that water is shaping up as a tool of statecraft in the emerging global order. The paper aims to fill such gaps by connecting hydro-strategic rivalry in the Brahmaputra basin to the wider change in geopolitics in the region in the 21st century.

Upstream Advantage of China and Dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo.

The Brahmaputra River, or the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet, is a river that has its origin in China, which provides China with an obvious upstream advantage over the downstream nations. Under transboundary river systems, upstream states inherently have more control over water flows, development of infrastructure and hydrological information. This is a geographical strength that has taken on political relevance in the Brahmaputra basin where Chinese projects to build dams have become an issue of concern in India and Bangladesh.

The Zangmu Dam is one of the most important projects in the area that became operational in 2015. According to Chinese government reports, the project is an example of a run-of-the-river hydropower facility that will produce electricity without damaging large bodies of water. China has claimed on several occasions that it has no plan of diverting the waters of the Brahmaputra and that its initiatives are in line with international environmental laws (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). These official utterances are meant to reassure the downstream nations and lessen geopolitical apprehensions.

But downstream states are still sceptical. According to scholars, run-of-the-river dams can also have effects on the flow of rivers, sediment transport, and seasonal water supplies (Magee, 2013). Strategically, when significant infrastructure is erected on the upstream rivers, the leverage may be enjoyed long term without the deliberate water diversion (Chellaney, 2011). This discrepancy between what is said on record and what is seen in strategy has contributed to a great deal of mistrust in the area.

The dam construction of the Yarlung Tsangpo in China, on the whole, shows the potential of water infrastructure to become a component of geopolitical strategy. On the one hand, China puts its projects in the context of development and renewable energy programs, but downstream countries perceive them through the prism of security. Such a perception gap underscores the fact that water is increasingly being used as a statecraft in the Brahmaputra basin.

Indian Strategic Response and Downstream Concerns.

The upstream dam's construction in China have greatly influenced the strategic thinking of India. India, as the intermediary riparian state in the Brahmaputra basin, has a dual challenge that it is both susceptible to upstream choices of the Chinese and at the same time, it must deal with water flows that impact on Bangladesh downstream. This distinctive status has elevated water governance as an important component of the national security and foreign policy of India.

One of the biggest Indian fears is that the flow of the rivers can change suddenly due to the dam activities. Although water diversion may not be a problem, upstream dams have the potential to influence seasonal and floods, sediment movement, and ecology of the rivers. The northeastern states of India are the ones that can experience severe impacts of these changes on agriculture and livelihoods.

Another reaction by India has seen it increase its own hydropower in the northeast. Researchers observe that the dam construction policy in India is partly motivated by the energy requirements, and partly motivated by the wish to have strategic complicity within the basin (Sinha, 2013). Developing its own

infrastructure will help India to be less vulnerable and have more bargaining power during future water negotiations. This shows how the aspect of hydro-infrastructure has been integrated into the grander geopolitical competition.

The Brahmaputra basin is directly connected with the overall geopolitical connection between India and China. Bordering conflicts and long-term strategic suspicions influence the interpretation of actions of both nations by each other. Consequently, the concept of water governance is mainly understood in terms of security, instead of an environmental or developmental approach (Crow & Singh, 2009). Such a relationship of water with the larger geopolitical tensions complicates collaboration.

India also has to look at its linkage with Bangladesh as the downstream country. Direct impact of water flowing out of India has impacts in agriculture, fisheries and livelihoods in Bangladesh. This puts India under pressure to strike a balance between regional obligations and national interests. This further complicates the hydro politics of Brahmaputra.

In general, the reaction of India toward the activities of China upstream proves the fact that water is becoming a geopolitical matter in South Asia. The Brahmaputra basin has ceased to be merely a joint natural resource but rather a locus of hydro-strategic competition that can be characterized by the unequal positions of power, lack of confidence, and seeking regional security.

Vulnerability and the Regional Cooperation in Bangladesh.

Being the most downstream state within the Brahmaputra basin, Bangladesh is the one that will experience the highest vulnerability in the new hydro-strategic competition. The nation relies on trans-boundary rivers in its farming, fisheries, transport as well as drinking water. Over 90 percent of the river water in Bangladesh flows into the country meaning that it is highly sensitive to any water management decisions of upstream activities (Government of Bangladesh, 2018). This physical fact defines one of the major priorities of Bangladesh on regional cooperation and multilateral water governance.

Flooding that is seasonal is a critical factor in the economy and ecology of Bangladesh. Floods of the Brahmaputra also deposit rich fertile sediments that take place throughout the year to sustain agriculture and help sustain the fertile delta system in the country. The downstream changes in the flow patterns of rivers as a result of the upstream dam systems may thus interfere with the agricultural system and the disaster management system (Rahaman, 2012). In the case of Bangladesh, we do not just face water shortage, but also water variability.

Bangladesh has been a proponent of multilateral river basin cooperation. In contrast to bilateral agreements, Bangladesh Favors a regional model which involves all the riparian states. According to the scholars, Bangladesh is influenced by the weaknesses of its bargaining power and also its high vulnerability in its approach (Crow & Singh, 2009). Through fostering such multilateralism, Bangladesh aims at establishing institutional procedures which will minimize distributional unbalances and promote a more equitable water distribution.

This triangular relation of China, India and Bangladesh indicates the multifaceted Ness of Brahmaputra hydro politics. Whereas China and India are more concerned with strategic competition and infrastructure growth, Bangladesh does not place so much emphasis on these, but rather on vulnerability and cooperation. The variation in priorities poses challenges and opportunities to govern the region.

Policy Implications and Recommendations.

To begin with, It is evident that there is a need to have a formal multilateral river basin mechanism between China, India and Bangladesh. Currently, Brahmaputra is a fragmented and mostly bilateral regime. There is a Joint Rivers Commission between India and Bangladesh and China is not included in any legally binding river basin convention (Rahaman, 2012). The lack of a trilateral institution system makes them suspicious and minimizes possibilities of data sharing. International organisations like World Bank and Asian Development Bank have severally insisted that joint institutions to govern shared river basins are needed to control risks and avoid the conflict (World Bank, 2018). Institutionalisation of dialogue, scientific cooperation, and conflict prevention could be assisted through the establishment of a Brahmaputra Basin Commission.

Second, information sharing and data transparency have to be enhanced. Currently, China provides very little homogametic data to India during the monsoon season pursuant to Memoranda of Understanding signed in 2002, 2008, and 2013 (Government of India, 2013). Nonetheless, the extent of data sharing is seasonal. Sharing data around the year would decrease uncertainty and foster confidence. Hydrological information about the potential tsunami disaster is particularly valuable in early alerts, disaster preparedness, and managing climate change. The transparency is expected to decrease the risk of water being viewed as a weapon, according to scholars (Wolf, 2007).

Third, confidence-building measures (CBMs) ought to be given precedence. Uttam Kumar Sinha believes that the perception holds more influence in creating mistrust in the Brahmaputra basin than actual

hydrologic damage (Sinha, 2020). Thus, collaborative research, scientific and technical discussions may assist in bridging the gaps in perceptions. Track-two diplomacy of scholars, engineers, and environmental experts may establish informal communication channels which may assist in the official diplomacy.

Lastly, India and Bangladesh need to enhance bilateral resilience. Flood management, storage of water and basin planning downstream cooperation can mitigate the exposure to upstream developments. India and Bangladesh should develop a cohesive and collaborative downstream strategy in order to wield more bargaining power and encourage collaborative interactions with China (Rahman, 2015).

Conclusion

This research paper has explored the soaring significance of water in Asian geopolitics using the Brahmaputra basin as an example. It indicates that the concept of weaponization of water does not always imply direct confrontation, or even deliberate war with water. Rather, it talks of the theoretical utilization of water infrastructure, data control and river basin management as a means of political influence and bargaining power. Rivers are turning into significant apparatus in statecraft in a multipolar Asia as power is distributed and regional relations are taking new forms.

Being situated at the upstream location of the Yarlung Tsangpo, China provides it with the geographical advantage and strategic freedom. In developing hydropower, dams, and the broader system of the Belt and Road, China has gained control in the cross-border water systems. Whereas China is offering these events as being developing and environmentally friendly, India and Bangladesh look at them through a security prism. The resulting discrepancy in perception has caused mistrust and worsened hydro-strategic competition in the region. There is as much perception and uncertainty to the Brahmaputra dispute as there is water shortage.

Meanwhile, the study also emphasizes the fact that conflict is not unavoidable. The history of the world knows that transboundary rivers tend to foster cooperation as opposed to war. Brahmaputra basin can serve as an example of regional cooperation provided that the riparian states develop open-minded policies, share hydrological information, and develop multilateral governance in the basin. The principles outlined in international standards advocated by international water bodies and the United Nations are helpful as guidelines towards equitable and sustainable water sharing.

The future of the Brahmaputra basin will eventually be dependent on political will. Hydro-strategic rivalry will escalate provided water is still considered principally as a strategic resource. But when perceived as a

common good and the foundation of collaboration, the river will turn into a bridge instead of a barrier. Making use of common rivers such as the Brahmaputra will be very important in determining the peace, security and sustainable development in a multipolar world.

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