



INDIA- CHINA DISPUTE VIS-À-VIS BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER WATER

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ABSTRACT:

China has land, sea and river water disputes with almost every neighboring country, so with India. Both India and China have border disputes since 1962 and they are still unresolved. In recent years one more contentious issue emerged between these two most populous countries of the world that is Brahmaputra River. This paper deals with origin, causes and possible solution of this dispute.

KEYWORDS: still unresolved, Brahmaputra River, possible solution.



INTRODUCTION

Before dealing the origin of the dispute, we need brief discussion of the origin and nature of the Brahmaputra River. This river has origin in the Kailas range of Himalayas (Tibet region of China) and flows for two thousand three hundred miles before emptying in Bay of Bengal in Bangladesh. In its long journey, she passes through China (1625 KM), India (918 KM) and Bangladesh (337 KM) and its watershed also falls within parts of Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar.¹ In its overall travel, river gains strength from various tributaries along the way. The river's journey through Tibet takes place at an average altitude of more than 12000 feet, which makes it the world's highest flowing river system. Its annual average discharge is one of the largest in the world too. This river is known as Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet (China), the Brahmaputra in India and Jamuna in Bangladesh.² This river is a source of life and livelihood for millions living along its route.

The Brahmaputra river water dispute between two neighbours arose when China started feasibility study of hydropower project located at river Great Bend. To remove mistrust regarding hydropower, both New Delhi and Beijing signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on data sharing on Brahmaputra river water in 2002. Under this mechanism, China is bound to provide hydrological information of Brahmaputra and Sutluj rivers to India during flood seasons. The arrangement requires China to provide flood season data of Brahmaputra to India during May 15-October 15 every year.³

In 2006, Chinese State Council's 35 member cabinet authorized detailed planning for the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) hydropower project and at the Great Bend. The Chinese plan comprised two projects: the construction of dam and diversion of the river course as part of the South-North projects great waters route.⁴ The same year both countries set official platform, an institutionalized Expert Level Mechanism to discuss various issues relating to trans-border Rivers.⁵ But being lower riparian country, India got apprehensive of the upper riparian's hydroelectric project.

In April 2010, during Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna's visit to Beijing, Chinese officials assured India that the projects on Brahmaputra would be run-of-the river and would create no water shortage downstream. When New Delhi requested Beijing to provide detailed information of the project, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Lui vaguely said: "China adopts a responsible attitude towards the development of cross border water resources. We adopt a policy that protection goals together with development, and take into full consideration the interests of downstream countries."⁶ Again in 2011, China's Minister of Water Resources clarified the issue saying that the Chinese Government was not planning to conduct any diversion projects along the Brahmaputra River given that there was not a pressing need.⁷

In January 2013, China promulgated its Five Year Plan which included proposal of three medium sized dams on the Yarlung Tsangpo. As lower riparian country, India was not consulted regarding the plan. Hence New Delhi strongly protested and reminded China that India was a "lower riparian state with considerable established user rights to the water of river."⁸ In March 2013, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit proposed the creation of a joint mechanism to study Chinese activity on Brahmaputra. But Mr. Jinping did not give any specific assurance to Indian PM. Later China rejected New Delhi's proposal of creating new water negotiation mechanism with India.⁹ In October 2013, India further asserted the need for a water sharing treaty with china on Brahmaputra River but failed to convince Beijing on the issue. However, both countries signed agreement on sharing water related information during monsoon months.¹⁰

There were reports in Chinese media in 2016 that China blocked a tributary of the Yardung Zangbo river as part of its most expensive hydropower project.¹¹ Meanwhile Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece, the Global Times advised India that to overreact to Chinese decision to block Brahmaputra tributary to construct dam which aimed economic development and utilization of water. It further advised India to adopt multilateral cooperative mechanism to promote cooperation among the Brahmaputra's three major riparian countries would be the most "effective solution" to the water dispute between India and China.¹² It further justified the project saying: "It is easy to understand the anger of the Indian people as they read recent news that China blocked a tributary of the Brahmaputra River ...people in the downstream country may be ignoring one thing. The reservoir capacity of the dam is less than 0.02 percent of the average annual run off of the Brahmaputra."¹³ Instead of multilateral cooperation, India preferred bilateral agreements with neighbours on the issue of river water sharing. India already had bilateral agreement with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. This could be nothing but a way of improving relations with Bangladesh so as to encircle India.¹⁴

In 2017, India stated that despite bilateral agreement with china regarding sharing of hydrological data of the movement, distribution and quality of water with India, New Delhi had not received data from China. Responding Indian request of hydrological data, Beijing said that its hydrological stations were being upgraded so it could not share data.¹⁵ Reiterating India's stand on data sharing, India's External Affairs Ministry spokesman, Ravees Kumar said: "We don't know the technical reasons behind this but there is an existing mechanism under which China is to provide hydrological data to us."¹⁶ Responding Indian complaint, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said: "Last year, due to the needs for reconstruction after being damaged by flood and out of such technological reasons as upgrading and renovation, the relevant hydrological stations do not have the conditions to collect relevant hydrological data."¹⁷ However, officials from Bangladesh accepted that they continued to receive water level and discharge level data from three Chinese hydrological stations located in Tibet since 2002.¹⁸

As suspicion prevailed in India over Chinese plan on diversion of Brahmaputra waters to its parched regions during dry seasons, India also asked China to provide data for non-monsoonal flows of the river. This Indian suspicion arose due to Chinese hydropower dam construction on Brahmaputra River in recent times. Finally in June 2018, India and china partially settled a dispute over the flood prone Brahmaputra River data issue on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit.¹⁹

In December 2020, the Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece again justified the hydropower station on the ground that it would generate the largest amount of electricity and would help achieve its 2060 carbon neutral goal. Again Global times criticized India's opposition to China's hydropower project by describing as "double standard." Criticizing New Delhi, Beijing stated that India had become accustomed to using water resource issues to crackdown on downstream countries including Pakistan and Bangladesh, its baseless attacks against China's planned hydro-project represented nothing but gauging the hearts of others with own mean measures."²⁰ Chinese daily also criticized India saying that New Delhi's hyped up rhetoric surrounding Brahmaputra hydropower project stem "from its zero sum, adversarial mentality."²¹

Few days later, Chinese Foreign Ministry said that India should not have any anxiety over the Brahmaputra river project and China would continue to have "good communication" with lower riparian states-India and Bangladesh. Asserting further on the issue, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman further said: "hydropower development in the Yarlung Zangbo River is China's legitimate right. When it comes to use development of Crossover River China always acts responsibly."²² He further stated that China's projects were based on planning and assessment giving full consideration to interests of downstream countries. Responding Chinese government statement, India's Foreign ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastva said, "As a lower riparian state with considerable established user rights to the waters of the trans-border river, the government has consistently conveyed its views and concerns to the Chinese authorities and has urged them to ensure that the interests of downstream states are not harmed by any activities."²³ This Indian reaction came on Brahmaputra on a time when India and China saw massive escalation of tension in Galwan valley in eastern Ladakh.

After the Galwan valley clash between Indian and Chinese soldiers in June 2020, New Delhi's opposition to China's hydropower project became stronger. In January 2021, India described any Chinese attempt to set up a hydropower station at Brahmaputra at Medang (Tibet) as an encroachment on the entitled rights to lower riparian states like India and Bangladesh.²⁴ It also insisted that such an act by China would adversely affect the availability of water in its basin during the lean season. To reduce any future negative impact of the Chinese dam, India also began planning to build a multipurpose 10,000 MW reservoir in Arunachal Pradesh. This 9.2 BCM "upper Siang" project on the Siang river in Arunachal Pradesh would be able to take the excess load of water discharge and can even store water in case of any deficit.²⁵ India's Central Water Commission (CWC) justified the project on the ground that it would be "highly beneficial for the state of Assam."

In the beginning Bangladesh did not oppose Chinese dam on Brahmaputra due to cordial relations with China. But in recent times Dhaka also opposed Chinese dam on Brahmaputra.²⁶ But ignoring concerns of both lower riparian countries India and Bangladesh, China's Yarlung Zangbo dam plan is moving ahead without being discussing or entering into any water sharing agreement with them.

Now big question arises: is Chinese dam on Brahmaputra really harmful for India? To answer this question one may adopt "Brahma Approach" (zero sum approach) or "Cooperative Approach" (non-zero sum approach). Brahma approach is named after strategic expert Brahma Challaney. His approach is largely influenced by zero sum model of the game theory. He argues that Chinese dam on Brahmaputra would be inimical to India's interest in various ways. First, Brahma Challaney argues that China knows its troops can't fight and defeat decisively against India which is a nuclear weapon power. So China is trying to weaponise water against India, by building dam in seismic active area.²⁷ In recent years, fear has grown in northeastern India that China could suddenly release Brahmaputra water and submerge the region. Second, Challaney further argues that Silt rich water comes from Tibet, not monsoon water collection is central to the river's hydrology and biodiversity support. It will further disrupt the Brahmaputra's annual flooding cycle which helps fertilize farmland by naturally spreading silt.²⁸

Some Indian experts believe in "cooperative (non zero sum) approach. They largely agree with Chinese arguments. Nilanjan Ghosh argues that Brahmaputra is substantially fed by snow as well as rain fall. But the normalized melt index (defined as the volumetric) snow and glacier upstream

discharge divided by downstream discharge) of Brahmaputra is merely in the range of 0.15-0.20, signifying that snow and glacial melt, the main source of the run off in the Tibetan region, contributes negligibly to the total flow.²⁹ As Tibetan region lies in the rain shadow and Himalaya acting as barrier to the rain laden monsoon, the annual precipitation in Tibet (source of Brahmaputra) averages about 300 mm. As tributaries cross Himalayan crest line, the annual average precipitation reaches around 2000 mm.³⁰ Hence a very large component of of the total annual flow of Brahmaputra is generated by tributaries flowing in india from Buring Dihing in east to Teesta in the west. Overall Brahmaputra gets fatter and mightier as it flows further downstream. This is mainly because of various tributaries like Dibang, Lohit, Subansiri, Manas, Sankosh and Teesta. Now it is clear downstream tributaries of India get more water due to many times more precipitation than the rain shadow Tibet. Mr. Nilanjan Ghosh is close to Chinese argument that the impact of water diversion from Brahmaputra by china will not have substantial negative impact on the flow regime in the Indian boundary. So thy argues that concern of many in India is based on the perception that structural interventions always reduce downstream flows which in case of Brahmaputra is not true.³¹

Given overall belligerent Chinese policy towards India on borders and towards its smaller neighbours in South China Sea, it's highly impossible that Beijing is serious about protecting the interests of lower riparian countries like India and Bangladesh. The apprehension about Chinese intention increases manifold when china does not share hydrological data of Brahmaputra in compliance to bilateral agreement between two neighbours. China as well as experts, who argue that diversion of water will not affect Brahmaputra water flow in rainy season, become silent on Brahmaputra water flow in lean season.

To conclude, it can be said that even if India accepts Beijing's argument that dam will not be harmful to India, lack of of transparency in sharing technical details with New Delhi make most of the Indians apprehensive of Chinese intentions. So if china has no desire to harm India, they should provide details of its hydropower projects on Brahmaputra and should try to reduce trust deficit between two neighbours on hydropower dam and border issues.

END NOTES

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