

## River Regionalism: Locating Transboundary Rivers in Regional Cooperation Context in South Asia

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The history of riparian relations in South Asia can be termed as essentially bilateral in nature, but we can notice a change in the contours of riparian negotiations after the end of the Cold War. The economic interdependencies built around regional and sub-regional institutions and infrastructure development initiatives, have pushed countries in the region to think more about how core issues of livelihood, environment and ecological sustainability, shared rivers will fit in the new regimes. The behaviour of China and India have been seen as ‘inclined’ towards building multilateralism, promoting various forums of multilateral dialogue and multi-stakeholder participation and dialogue, at Track Three and Track Two levels. However, there still seems to be an aversion towards formal treaties governing multilateral engagement on rivers, by both India and China, which explains the lack of any multilateral treaty on transboundary rivers in which either of the countries are a signatory in South Asia. The question is how these hardened stances can be offset to build alternate processes, an informal code of conduct, thereby bring forth a sense of collective responsibility to a shared transboundary river basin, for instance, the Brahmaputra river basin.

India is regarded as an Asian growth engine, and as it is progressing towards a new economic engagement with the world, the issue of water resources and the transboundary aspects of water management have come into focus. The stress of water resources will increase in India given its huge population and industrial activity. India is a co-riparian country and shares many of its rivers with Bhutan, Bangladesh, China, Nepal and Pakistan, and this highlight the diplomatic engagement required by India with its neighbours relating to transboundary water sharing and management. India has had varying tones of overall diplomatic relations and engagement with its neighbours over the past few decades after its independence, and this is bound to have spillover effects on transboundary water issues in the overall region. At a time when India is staking its claim to be among the countries on the high table of international politics, it will have to employ innovative diplomatic strategies to tackle emerging transboundary water issues. This includes locating the transboundary rivers it shares with its neighbouring countries in a regional and sub-regional development context.

## River Regionalism

I propose the concept of ‘river regionalism’, borrowing from Dent’s definition of political regionalism (Dent 2002), which can be defined as and referring to integral formations of transnational government and policy networks, the expression of shared political, economic and development interests among the basin riparians and stakeholders, advancement in policy coordination and policy enterprises, and the creation of regional level institutions to manage the common ‘river basin interest’. The analytical line of enquiry is if ‘river regionalism’ does exist in South Asia.

The operationalization of this concept of ‘river regionalism’ in South Asia will be done through the analysis of the challenges and prospects of regional water cooperation through sub-regional initiatives in South Asia, the ability to comprehend the language of transboundary water cooperation by the regional and sub-regional initiatives, and if such issues resonates with the generative grammar (Ruggie 1982) of regionalism and sub-regional integration regimes in South Asia. This will happen through the analysis of the convergence or divergence of national, sub-regional and regional agendas in South Asia, the ability to build a regional consensus, and finally, be able to bring in recommendations towards a roadmap of including transboundary water issues to the agendas of sub-regional and regional initiatives in South Asia.

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## The Regional Cooperation Story in South Asia and Transboundary Waters

The general assessment of the sub-regional story in South Asia is of a defensive-type regionalism rather than a positive-type regionalism, a classification borrowed from

Taga’s two-fold typology of post-Cold War regionalism, which were defensive type regionalism and positive type regionalism (Taga 1994), emerging from the debate on regional bloc-building. This defensive-type regionalism is primarily from a standpoint of an overarching state-centric approach, which has markers of economic regionalism, but is besotted with a securitised, nation-state sovereignty-centric mindset of cooperation. When the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed, it was termed as an economic regionalism typology, however national security considerations took prominence, and the process has been caught between the strenuous nature of bilateral relations between India and Pakistan, and the imperatives of sustained engagement for the overall proclaimed idea of South Asian regionalism.

The sub-regional initiatives in South Asia face the same securitised nature of interactions, and the participating nation-states remain apprehensive of exploring the fuller potential of regional cooperation, more so because the sub-regions involved in these processes are still going through a process of national integration, politically and in development terms. This overlapping layers of integration imperatives for the nation-states, both in the national and sub-regional context, particularly the case of Northeast India, for instance, makes for a limited scope of regional cooperation on many issues. The borderlands encompassing South Asia and Southeast Asia remain trapped in overlapping cycles of conflict which are political, social, ethnic, ecological and developmental in nature, and this is true of the geographically contiguous regions of Northeast India, South, Central and Eastern Bhutan, parts of Bangladesh, the northern parts of Myanmar bordering India and Bangladesh, and of Southwest China.

The basic foundations of sub-regional and regional initiatives in South Asia remain weak, because they started off on an exclusivist platform and rationale of either trying to keep Pakistan or China out of the regional cooperation agenda. This was primarily driven by India, and therefore sub-regional initiatives in South Asia are said to be based on negatives

rather than positives, and therefore remains trapped in narrow national agendas, becoming basically non-starters. The sub-regional initiatives fall in the typology of defensive-type regionalism, are inherently securitised, and as a result are unable to deepen regional cooperation agendas on the one hand or widen regional cooperation agendas on the other. The sub-regional cooperation story in South Asia has not been able to purposefully bring in new issue areas to their respective agendas. Transboundary water issues is one such issue area which has been long kept out, due to the narrow security framings and defensive-type regionalism evident in South Asia.

Transboundary water issues do find mention in South Asian sub-regional and regional cooperation agendas in narrow terms of energy cooperation, which includes primarily hydropower development, and in inland water transport, which falls under the larger connectivity and economic development imperatives of these processes. The strategic resource framing of transboundary waters by the respective nation-states in South Asia, makes for such a limited view of sub-regional and regional cooperation on transboundary water issues. The larger issue-linkages to agriculture, livelihood, ecology, biodiversity, wetlands connectivity, pollution concerns have not been seen in the larger cooperative regional assessments in South Asia, on a transboundary scale. There is evidence of a clear lag of political agenda-setting on transboundary water issues by the nation-states on the sub-regional and regional cooperation initiatives, and this emanates from a narrow bounded strategic framing and a securitised mindset.

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## **Setting the Agenda for Regional Water Cooperation in South Asia**

At one level, the nation state-driven discourse of regionalism has not been able to bring forward evidence of practical frameworks and success stories in South Asia, in terms of the road ahead on regional cooperation on transboundary waters, and is stuck in between the competing strategic priorities of the countries involved. However, there are multiple evidence of transboundary cooperation examples, which have taken place under the nation state-driven regionalism radar, which can provide important lessons for sub-regional cooperation initiatives in South Asia. The instances of transboundary environmental and human security challenges in South Asia need to be tackled within the framework of these sub-regional initiatives, taking due cognizance of transboundary rivers and natural resources as ‘regional public goods’, and conserved and managed sustainably (Rana and Uberoi 2012).

The concept of ‘river regionalism’ in South Asia is analysed in the backdrop of how the functions of agenda-setting and issue-linkages happen in sub-regional and regional initiatives, and how transboundary rivers and water issues can find entry-points and modes of engagement. The four-fold typology of rivers by Sadoff and Grey (2002), which are the political, economic, ecological and catalytic rivers, are useful frameworks to analyse the agenda-setting and issue linkages in sub-regional and regional initiatives in South Asia. Additionally, the framework of cooperative regional assessments at the levels of transboundary, distributive and institutional analysis (Sadoff and Grey 2005) enables exploring opportunities for cooperation at a regional scale for transboundary water issues. These frameworks help analyse alternate approaches, strategies and entry points for regional water cooperation through sub-regional initiatives in South Asia.

## **The Ecological Benefits of Regional Water Cooperation in South Asia**

The ecological benefits of cooperation on transboundary rivers in South Asia are closely tied with the understanding of the

interconnectedness of the larger Himalayan ecology, the shared geographical context, upon which the premise of sub-regional cooperation initiatives in South Asia are also based. The mapping of sub-regional initiatives in South Asia provides evidence that ecological and environmental issues such as biodiversity, climate change, disaster management, and even water issues have been included at various points of time, but cooperation has been limited in nature. The framing of the ecological benefits of cooperation such as tackling water quality issues, tackling water pollution, improving biodiversity, soil conservation, erosion protection, hydrological data sharing to reduce disasters, wetland conservation and overall sustainability issues are critical to bringing an alternative language of regional cooperation in South Asia, moving away from the past narrow securitization.

### **The Economic Benefits of Regional Water Cooperation in South Asia**

The effective framing of the economic benefits of cooperation on transboundary rivers in South Asia is premised on the understanding that historically, civilizations which have not understood or managed water issues well, have effectively missed the bus of economic development. The mapping of the sub-regional initiatives in South Asia provides evidence that the economic complementarities of water resources management, albeit in limited terms of hydropower development and inland water navigation are already present. The need is to build upon these existing economic synergies, and provide new entry points to the sub-regional cooperation agenda, which clearly underlines the economic costs of non-cooperation on transboundary rivers in South Asia. This approach synthesises a regional agenda of economic realism connected to benefit-sharing and sustainability aspects of transboundary water management, agricultural productivity, tackling floods, droughts and climate change.

### **The Political Benefits of Regional Water Cooperation in South Asia**

The framing of political benefits of regional water cooperation in South Asia is based on the optics of effective transboundary governance mechanisms, which involve the national

governments of the region provide a larger agency to its sub-national units/provinces to set the agenda on managing transboundary water resources. This feeds into the convergence of national policies relating to the food-water-energy nexus at a transboundary level, linking to evolving sub-regional cooperation agendas. The roadmap towards a regional purpose of cooperation and solidarity in South Asia can be made through demonstrating credible conflict resolution mechanisms on issues related to transboundary rivers, which will be able to set the context and narrative for sub-regional initiatives to broaden and deepen their cooperation agendas. A common basin-wide interest articulation and confidence-building towards legal water regimes can lead to a convergence of political commitments on regional development agendas.

### **The Catalytic Benefits of Regional Water Cooperation in South Asia**

The framing of catalytic benefits from regional water cooperation is based on the combined spillover effects and reinforcement of the momentum achieved over the past two decades on regional economic integration in South Asia through a positive engagement on politically sensitive issues of transboundary water issues. The long-term sustainable framing of progress through sub-regional cooperation in South Asia has to be rooted in an accurate understanding of transboundary water resources and optimal utilization in a benefit-sharing mechanism. Sadoff and Grey (2005) point out that the lack of cooperation on transboundary water issues leads to a fragmentation of regional integration agenda, and the way forward is the optimal utilization of the regional economic infrastructure, which includes water infrastructures, markets and trade. Regional water cooperation can be framed as a core catalyst for accelerating the progress of sub-regional and regional economic cooperation initiatives in South Asia.

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## **Assessment of Regional Water Cooperation through Sub-Regional Initiatives**

### ***Strategic and Cooperative Regional Assessment in South Asia***

The strategic framing of sub-regional initiatives to be able to carry forward the optics of regional integration in South Asia is underlined by the fact that respective national governments have assigned resources and attention to them in the recent past. The slow waning of the SAARC activities since 2014, have been commensurately met by a strategic build-up of momentum through sub-regional initiatives such as BIMSTEC, BBIN, SASEC and BCIM. There has been a larger strategic understanding in South Asia that the strengthening of alternative forums and initiatives to the SAARC, will be able to obfuscate the inclusivity challenges of the past, and offer broader policy opportunities and ability to address regional governance issues. It will help streamline the cumulative interactions among a range of past, present and possible future activities at the regional and sub-regional level, providing strategic assessments on alternative scenarios of regional integration in South Asia.

### ***Transboundary Cooperative Regional Assessment in South Asia***

The transboundary cooperative regional assessment of sub-regional initiatives in South Asia is based on a synthesis of practical civil society-led and technical scientific solutions-led understanding of the transboundary levels of interactions. This is entirely dependent upon the ability of the stakeholders at the transboundary level to generate the political will to remove the challenges posed by the function of the nation-state borders, implement the technical solutions on the transboundary scale, and then put back the political border in its place. This is the manner and method by which transboundary cooperation on flowing resources such as transboundary rivers can take place in complex political settings. The transboundary cooperative regional assessments can be drawn from past experiences at the bilateral levels, as effective building blocks or best practices indicators,

then scaled up to integrate the dynamics of multilateral interactions, building on current transboundary issue-linkages/agendas.

### ***Distributive Cooperative Regional Assessment in South Asia***

The distributive aspects of cooperation on transboundary waters need to be assessed in terms of benefit-sharing across national political borders, where the costs of non-cooperation are clearly underlined for respective national economies and regionally. The sub-regional cooperation momentum has been perceived in terms of larger countries such as India having to contribute a disproportionate costs in underwriting the regimes, however, given the interdependencies of South Asia as a region, the distributive indicators of political, economic, social and ecological regional integration has to offer a positive sum outcome. Sadoff and Grey (2005) emphasises alternative management and development scenarios, which involves an exploration of an equitable benefit-sharing arrangement of cooperation on transboundary rivers. A distributive analysis in South Asia of the benefits of regional water cooperation will enable sub-regional initiatives to adopt alternative cooperation scenarios and models.

### ***Institutional Cooperative Regional Assessment in South Asia***

The institutional level analysis for sub-regional initiatives to take up regional water cooperation more proactively involves an understanding of the costs of sustaining institutions over a period of time, and the greatest possible net outcomes for the respective national governments. The trajectory of institution-building in South Asia in terms of regional and sub-regional cooperation, the multiplicity of agendas and forums, and the capabilities of respective national governments to come together to sustain these institutions through scientific and economic resources are indicators of such assessments. The current scenario in South Asia does not have robust institutions for regional water cooperation, while the momentum in sub-regional initiatives need to factor in a detailed institutional analysis of adopting water issues in their

agenda. The building of effective multilateral institutions require considerable time and resources, political will and staying power, breaking out of zero-sum bilateral modes.

## Conclusion

The effective mechanisms for regional water cooperation through sub-regional initiatives is to actively promote the idea of paradiplomacy in the region, building on the piecemeal gains of sub-national policy networks on transboundary water issues. The sub-regional and transboundary policy networks help create bilateral synergy on issues of common national interest, and that can in turn create a larger sense of regionally-appraised bilateralism (Crow and Singh 2000). This is distinctly a step ahead of the bilateral trap that countries in South Asia have traditionally been engaged in, the symbols being the Farakka Treaty between India and Bangladesh, the Indus Treaty between India and Pakistan and the Mahakali Treaty between India and Nepal. In the Indian context, Kurian (2019) points out that by privileging formal inter-governmental processes, a range of formal/informal practices, exchanges, networks at the border regions have been overlooked, which is critical for sub-regional diplomacy.

The gains made at the bilateral level between countries in South Asia on transboundary water issues over the years, combined with the issue-linkages established at parallel bilateral levels, effectively provide the mechanisms for a regional appraisal of such bilateral synergies. For instance, the complex bilateral dynamics among the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal, the BBIN grouping, can have a regionally-appraised bilateralism strategy on the Mahakali and the Farakka gains, and this can in turn put transboundary water issues firmly in the agenda of sub-regional initiatives, not just limited to BBIN, but also BIMSTEC and SASEC, thereby achieving some sense of inter-regional cooperation synergy as well. This model of regional cooperation is evidenced among the Mekong River Commission countries, where the National Mekong Committee's bilateral interactions and the sub-national policy networks have effectively fostered multilateral consensus.

The mechanisms of transboundary hydrological data sharing, mostly at the bilateral levels at present, are significant stepping stones towards building riparian trust and confidence in the region, and also help foster effective water and risk sharing mechanisms, related to irrigation, agriculture, livelihood, flood forecasting, climate change, disaster risk reduction, water pollution and efficiency of water infrastructures.

A credible research-backed focus on a consortium of issues, not seen as politically linked with transboundary rivers, such as environment, livelihood, biodiversity, climate change, disaster risk reduction, transboundary ecology, can help generate a desecuritized sub-regional grammar/spirit of transboundary water cooperation. This is in essence the synthesis of the idea of 'river regionalism', mechanisms which can be supplemented from the progress of already existing multilateral research and dialogue processes. The 'Mekong Spirit', for instance, highlights the history of regional hydro-politics among the Lower Mekong countries, deepening and widening cooperation (Lauridsen 2004). Can the adoption of informal code of conduct (norms, procedures, principles) within a possible 'Brahmaputra Spirit' framework, increase cooperation and promote flows ensuring collective responsibility for riparian communities of the Brahmaputra river basin? This is an example for the roadmap ahead for South Asia.

Regional Water Cooperation through sub-regional initiatives can happen through a positive agenda-setting and issue-linkage engagement strategy with the inter-governmental level by the civil society stakeholders, showcasing successes/best practices of sub-national and transboundary level cooperation as the pot of honey. This will enable the existing mechanisms of hydro-diplomacy in South Asia to acquire momentum and the multiplicity of sub-regional initiatives such as BIMSTEC, BBIN and BCIM can function as natural and effective vehicles of such diplomacy. There is a need to build transparency into the processes of multilateral negotiations on transboundary water issues in South Asia to ensure trust and confidence. Multilateral platforms should not be taken as

the sole criterion of regional cooperation, but instead build on multiple sectoral levels and parallel tracks of bilateral engagement and arrangements, hence creating a regionally appraised bilateralism model in South Asia.

There is a multiplicity of sub-regional initiatives in South Asia, all having a significant momentum currently in regional development engagement, and can provide a cumulative effect of pushing transboundary water issues to the core of sub-regional cooperation narrative. It needs to avoid the negatives of hegemonic forum-shopping behaviour, which only undermines one process against the other. There are multilateral environmental policy networks operating in South Asia, which need to be brought together in convergence to add to the cumulative momentum. An abiding political consensus on the long-term positive-sum outcomes of regional water cooperation in an iterated sub-regional engagement context in South Asia is essential; clearly underlining the economic costs of non-cooperation on transboundary water issues; enlarging the regional cooperation pie towards benefit-sharing. An inclusive sub-regional water cooperation agenda requires a basin-wide approach in South Asia. ■

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