

Brahmaputra and its Imageries: Strategising Sustainable Development

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Situating the Debate on Brahmaputra

The issue of water diversion from the Brahmaputra River first came to the public domain in 1999, when Jiang Zemin announced China's Great Western Development Policy, aimed at developing the Western region¹. This policy did not only have legal, political, economic, social, cultural consequences for China's peripheral regions, but to a large extent, it also popularised the vocabulary of the 'Great Western Extraction' (GWE), which potentially involved the transfer of water from Tibet within the broader strategy of the South-North Water Transfer Project (Western Route). Significantly, as part of the 'Opening of the West' and the West-East transfer Project, China has considered using water, energy and minerals, as essential resources to develop the autonomous regions of Xinjiang, Tibet and Ningxia (Jeong 2015). However, it was in the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2011-2015), that China gave priority to develop the following basin rivers - the Jinshajiang River (59 GW), the Yalongjiang River (25 GW), Daduhe River (24.5 GW), the Lancangjiang (Mekong) River (25.6 GW), the Nujiang (Salween) River (21.4

GW) and the Yarlung-Tsangpo River (79 GW) in order to meet its target of producing 15 per cent of the nation's energy with renewable sources by 2020. With economic incentives, in terms of getting access to South East Asia's electricity export market, and security motivations given the consequence this policy had for maintaining political stability in these areas and integrating them to Chinese polity seemed to be the broad framework for anchoring this development policy. When interpreted from the politico-security lens, thus, this policy seemed to be indicative of a shift, where it had moved from a defensive approach, to what Taylor Fravel (2019) terms as 'active defense' to finally consolidating its power in Tibet. Meanwhile, the vision of transforming Tibet, as a trading hub in the region, which had significant implication, started giving more meaning to the 'active defense' approach developed in China since the 1980s.

Emerging Perspectives on Brahmaputra Debate: Alarmists, Rationalists, Strategists

It is against this backdrop that one needs to situate the contending views regarding China's intention to divert water from the Brahmaputra river. If one looks at the prolific literature around this discourse, it has almost been transformed into a debate in the last two decades, and can be broadly categorised into an 'alarmist' view; the 'rationalist view' and the

¹China's western region embraces the six provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou, the three autonomous regions of Ningxia, Xinjiang and Tibet, and the Chongqing Municipality which is directly under the administration of the Central Government.

‘strategic view’. The alarmists suggest that the Brahmaputra diversion is being implemented by China, as part of their plan to build a 1000 km long tunnel to the Taklamakan desert in Xinjiang province. The primary reason for validating such an alarmist concern is perceptions regarding China’s identity as a water hegemon, which endow meaning to multiple probabilities associated with China’s employment of its strategic upper-riparian leverage to pressurise India, as a lower riparian (Chellaney 2017). For the alarmists, therefore the diversion of Brahmaputra is a part of a grand design - an extension of the South – North Transfer project envisioned by Mao in the 1950s. This idea has been reified by the policy establishment in 1980s and 90s and is seen as a diplomatic card to isolate India diplomatically vis-a-vis her South Asian neighbours (Mitra 2017; Bhat 2017).

The ‘rationalists’ on the other hand offer a rebuttal to this view, in order to put the Brahmaputra water diversion in perspective. They consider the diversion of Brahmaputra as a distant possibility, given the economic cost-benefit analysis involved with such projects and the ecological/ climatic consequences that follow from them (Swain 2017). The rationalists argue that there are three routes of the South-North water transfer projects - Eastern, Western and Central - for water diversion schemes in China. While the Eastern and the Central routes are complete, the controversy around Yarlung-Tsangpo revolves around the Western route, which is geared towards diverting waters to the Xinjiang and Gansu provinces and is part of a smaller “Western” project, which intends to tap the Yalong, Dadu and the Jinsha rivers that flow into South West China and are tributaries of the Yangtse River (Xiao 2018). This project, as argued involved the construction of a 300 kilometre long tunnel, which does not interfere with the Brahmaputra waters (Xiao 2018). However, such responses have not allayed fears, in the backdrop of the debate generated by Zangmu and Muoto Dams, which have been constructed in the middle reaches of Brahmaputra (Yong 2014; Deka and Krishnan 2015). It is interesting to note that around 2010, when the discourse on diversion of Yarlung Tsangpo was at its peak in Indian domestic

media debates, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement that no such scheme was underway and that the Indian media was confusing the “great Western project” with the “smaller Western project”. Significantly, even before this Chinese statement, on October 29, 2009, a report had stated that India has no objections to the project being envisaged by China since it is a run of the river project and that it would do no actual harm to India (Bisht 2009). In addition, on November 5, 2009 Pawan Kumar Bansal, the then Union Water Resource Minister noted that there is no evidence of China diverting the Brahmaputra waters. He, however, confirmed that a small dam is being constructed upstream about 1,100 kilometres inside Chinese territory and that it was meant for ‘local use’. The Indian Minister also reiterated the importance of remaining alert on the issue. Some scholars have suggested the fear of diverting Brahmaputra as ‘over exaggerated’, as it is argued that Brahmaputra is a snow/glacial fed river and it is often precipitation on Indian side that contributes to the flow of Brahmaputra in India (Ghosh 2020).

However, this is not to state that the Yarlung-Tsangpo interventions by China be conveniently placed as a diversion/non-diversion binary. This can not only misguide the debate but also obfuscate the broader strategic view in making. The strategic view becomes important in this regard as it helps unlayering a web of interconnections and relationships being created inside Tibet. This view places the Brahmaputra debate within the broader means-end debate, where the fundamental goal is directed towards achieving internal and external objectives. While at the internal level, the aim is to consolidate its base in Tibet, by making it the hub of modernisation, which is able to fuel and sustain economic activities in the region; at the external level it aims to connect with South Asian neighbours through economic trade, thus transforming Tibet’s identity as a strategic node of communication. Given this analysis, it can be argued that, China’s policy towards Tibet and projects on Yarlung-Tsangpo, aim to facilitate a grand strategic design, thereby creating a web of strategic nodes, for facilitating conditions to transform the physical and psychological

character of Tibet. Thus, how the water transfer schemes are connected in terms of creating a transformational potential in Tibetan landscape and what will be the cumulative economic, psychological consequence at the bilateral level for India in particular and South Asia, countries like Bhutan and Bangladesh in general, is what needs to be understood (Mathou 2005). Significantly, in terms of assessing and predicting China's riparian behaviour, China's connectivity efforts towards South Asia need to be underlined. Termed as the, "three vertical and two horizontal links" which are supposed to link Tibet's economy to South Asia, via the China-Nepal, Qinghai-Tibet, Xinjiang-Tibet, Tibet-Sichuan, and the Tibet-Yunnan highways are important in this regard². In this backdrop, China's hydro diplomacy towards South Asia is hinged on a two legged approach. First, it helps Beijing to reduce the income gap between China's eastern provinces and its western regions, which strengthens both, national economic integration and political stability. Second, by selling electricity to its neighbours, it also promotes cross-border integration, which benefits the Western China Development programme (Svensson 2012).

While the aforementioned views are important explanations for understanding China's motivation and behavior, they are not helpful in addressing how the riverine engagement between China and South Asia will unfold in the coming years. For instance, they do not reveal strategic imageries, which could become dominant in near future. In order to examine the trajectories, and go beyond a linear approach to analyse the pattern, understanding the dialectical way of thinking becomes important.

Dialectics and 'ways of thinking'

Dialectical ways of thinking are premised on the notion of logical arguments, which recognise the existence of opposites. Asian dialectics is different from Western dialectics, as the latter focuses on dualism and the former on holism. Nisbett (2004:45) notes that

² The links include Qinghai-Tibet, Xinjiang-Tibet, Tibet-Sichuan, and the Tibet-Yunnan highways. For details see, Svensson 2012, p. 18.

'application of dialectical approaches for Easterners would mean seeking a middle way, when faced with contradictions and for Westerners, it would mean insisting on the correctness of one belief over another'. The central question that animates dialectics is whether or not contradictory logics can be reconciled. While Hegelian dialectics takes synthesis into account, and expresses dialectics in form of a linear thesis-anti-thesis-synthesis, Asian dialectical reasoning is synthetic but also holistic in nature (Ahmed 2017). Graphically, Chinese dialectics can be understood from the cosmological diagram of Yin and Yang, which essentially means that both the yin (passive force) and yang (active force) exist because of each other. The principle of Yin and Yang is an expression of relationship that exists between opposing but inter-penetrating forces (Qin 2018). Both forces complete each other and create conditions for altering one into the other. In other words, Chinese philosophy tells us that change happens but does in a gradualist manner. The key response to manage change is to create enabling conditions for change to happen. This holism in Chinese thinking must be understood for having insights on Chinese strategy.

This argument can be better understood by examining how the transition of leadership in China has taken this dialectical thinking forward. The transformation of Deng Xiaoping's strategic guideline that China needed to "hide capabilities and bide time", as Rush Doshi (2019) argues, was addressed by then President Hu Jintao in a 2009 speech, when he modified "hide capabilities and bide time" by stressing that China needed to "actively accomplish something". Doshi notes that, 'hide capabilities and bide time' and 'accomplish something' were placed in a dialectical relationship in key party texts. While in laymen's terms, it meant they were basically opposite concepts, from the lens of dialectics of Chinese thinking, when Hu stressed one part of the dialectic, he was also moving towards the other, thereby substantially revisiting Chinese strategy in the changed context, emphasising its continuity. This invocation of dialectics in Chinese strategic thinking, which emphasises relations or relational ways of thinking, becomes an

interesting departure point for understanding the unfolding dynamics in the Himalayas.

From the lens of holism and relationality then, the pattern which emerges in northern Himalayas, is significant, as the strategic objectives cannot be divorced from the way the Himalayan landscape is being transformed (Stobdan 2020). The tactical India-China faceoff over the Doklam plateau is one example of this transformation. The Doklam 2017 faceoff, which eventually led China and India to take a positional stand over Doklam for the first time and the response of China to refuse sharing of Brahmaputra data with India is not only indicative of China consolidating its base in the North-Western sector of Bhutan, but also indicates, the consequences of any resistance by India. This also puts Bhutan in an uncomfortable situation, given that the Himalayan country is conscious about safeguarding its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Meanwhile, any opposition on the diversion of Brahmaputra from India, also appears simplistic to India's lower riparian neighbours Bangladesh and Pakistan, who have been criticizing India's behavior on similar grounds.

Against this backdrop, it can be argued that the Brahmaputra controversy needs to be interpreted as a tactic for distraction, and comes across as a strategic leverage in China's hand. The question of Brahmaputra diversion, is therefore a non-water issue for China, and has to be seen as a strategic lever, which China has created in India's northern borders. Given this imagery it would not be wrong to argue that, there is a low possibility of China entering into an agreement with India on Brahmaputra, as any such agreement would militate against China's interest. One of the most direct learning this has for India is its policy towards rivers in North-East, which should be delinked from politicisation and securitisation and focus should be on developing resilience among the population, as Brahmaputra basin is a flood prone region, lying in a sensitive seismic zone. Quality control is also what India should emphasise on vis-a-vis Chinese actions, and strategising sustainability could be an appropriate framing option for both countries for moving forward.

The Way Forward: Strategizing Sustainability

Given this strategic imagery what could be the way forward? An appropriate response to this question would be to explore ways through which India and China can broaden and deepen their water engagement within the framework of sustainable water governance. Water and sustainable development has emerged as an important framework in the international water policy context. Significantly, multilateral ways of engaging China should be privileged, given inherent limitations in its bilateral water practices. Some of the limitations include: First, China's water practices have revolved around One River-One Agreement policy. This, on part of China, can be seen as a strategy to evade 'restricted negotiation frameworks', in which two issues can be tied to each other to create compatible bargains. Second, if one looks at the successful water agreements that China has had with countries, such as Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Russia, it has respected principles related to sovereignty and no-harm principle, focusing on provisions specific to water quality. It is significant to note that one of the primary drivers for Russia-China water cooperation has been the convergence, which both countries have had towards the Ramsar Convention and Convention on Biological Diversity (Hei 2015; Vinogradov and Wouters 2013). This is an important precedent because, it is reflective of the fact that, the meaning of the river cooperation is not restricted to the flow of water but also the biodiversity, sediments, wetlands, which are important components of the eco-system and can change the way hydro-diplomacy is perceived by neighbours. This example is significant as it has consequences for opening ways of cooperation between India and China around issues as that of the black-necked crane (Ghai 2018). Third, it is also important to note that China has followed a rationalist framework of bargaining, where economic interests have been the main drivers for cooperation.

Given these facts when one put the rivers that flow from China into India into perspective, one notices that only a small proportion of basin's water supply is used by China. So

while the quantity of water coming from China is not much of a concern, the quality of water has concerned India. In this backdrop, one of the ways to move forward is to revisit multilateral environmental agreements that are relevant to China-India relations. Also, one should broaden the discourse on sustainable development between China and India. Chinese interpretation of sustainable development is largely perceived from the lens of economic value. This anthropocentric view privileges human needs and interests and ecological needs are often reconciled through the Payment of Ecosystem services. The question that emerges therefore is - in what ways can India and China localise/regionalise Sustainable Development Goals? Can both countries strike a *modus vivendi* for understanding transboundary water issues under common frames of reference, which can benefit all riparian countries?

If one looks at the Sustainable Development Goal 6.5.2 (transboundary water cooperation), 16 (peace and justice for strong institutions) and, 18 (partnerships to achieve goals), they offer a holistic framework and a clear policy map to take cooperation forward. One significant way to deepen and broaden water engagement is to engage at Track One, Track One and Half, Track Two and Track Three levels around the concept of sustainable development goals and identify Track One led collaborative partnerships (Yesuda et al 2018). One of the primary objectives of diplomacy is effective communication between actors in order to build mutual good will and trust between countries. Focus on Water Management Institutions (WMI) and revisiting benefit-sharing mechanisms and multi-level cooperation tracks could be a potential way to move forward and help address the ecological and economic needs of riparian states (Xie and Jia 2018; Feng, Wang and Liu, 2019). A strategy to respond to these Sustainable Development Goals, where issues related to ecological damage are discussed and finding discursive spaces where both countries can learn and inform each other can help translate the framework of sustainable water governance into reality between China and South Asia in the long term. ■

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