

Water as a Strategic Resource: India's Transboundary River Diplomacy

"The next great strategic contest may not be fought over oil, but over water."

1. Introduction:

Since time immemorial, water has been a critical resource for humanity, essential for sustaining life and its scarcity, making it a precious resource fought over by empires over the centuries. Ancient civilizations like the Mesopotamian, the Indus valley, and many more were found to be located near the most prominent source of water, rivers.

Conflicts over rivers have been a part and parcel of humanity's evolution with the earliest recorded conflict taking place between the Sumerian cities of Lagash and Umma in 2500 BCE and in India, the Rohini river dispute taking place between the Shakya and the Koliya clan in 6 BCE.

In the contemporary era, the strategic significance has grown even more pronounced, with river water being utilised as a part of multipurpose projects. Persisting issues like droughts, water scarcity, population growth, and the increasing demand for food and energy have transformed it into a developmental resource.

For India, whose major rivers transcend the political boundaries and flow into countries such as China and Pakistan, effective transboundary river diplomacy has become an essential aspect of safeguarding the water security and maintaining regional stability.

2. Major Transboundary Rivers of India:

River	Origin	Shared With	Strategic Importance
Indus	Tibet	Pakistan	Irrigation & Treaty
Ganga	Himalayas	Bangladesh	Agriculture
Brahmaputra	Tibet	China, Bangladesh	Hydropower
Teesta	Sikkim	Bangladesh	Water Sharing
Mahakali	Himalayas	Nepal	Energy

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Kosi	Nepal	Nepal/India	Flood Control
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Being one of the World's Largest riparian states, multiple major river systems of India are transboundary in nature. India shares its rivers with Nepal, Bhutan, China, Pakistan and Bangladesh, making cooperative water governance an essential part of the policy framework.

3. India's Transboundary Water Relations: Country-wise Analysis

3.1 Pakistan: The Indus Basin in India's Strategic Calculus

"Blood and water cannot flow together"

The Indus River and its basin have been the focal point of multiple civilizations through history with the earliest being traced to the famous Indus Valley civilization and subsequently the Kushanas and the later empires that came after them. During British colonial rule, some canals were constructed in the river basin, allowing a transfer of surplus Jhelum and Chenab water into the Ravi River.

On September 19, 1960, the political leaders of both India and Pakistan signed a treaty with a distinguished international banker, setting the political and hydrological landscape of the Indian subcontinent. The treaty was signed by the Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the military ruler of Pakistan, Field marshal Ayub Khan in the presence of William Illif, the Vice President of the World Bank is today known as the Indus water treaty.

The Indus water treaty, as widely believed is not a water sharing agreement but rather is based on division of waters with the partitioning of the Indus River, the Western river - Chenab, Jhelum, Indus - being allocated to Pakistan and the Eastern Rivers - Ravi, Beas, Sutlej being allocated to India. The rivers were apportioned and were not based on equitable distribution. Despite the various conflicts occurring over the years between India and Pakistan, with diplomatic ties even being downgraded severely at multipoint of time, the Indus Water Treaty persisted through it all. With the onset of the recent terror attack on 22nd of April 2025, India took a decisive state and moved beyond its past

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strategy by putting the Indus Water treaty in abeyance, which has survived countless proxy attacks and even 3 wars.

While the abeyance of the Indus water treaty does not bring with itself any major short-term benefits, however it is important to note that now India is not bound by any legal obligation in the restriction of the Western rivers which, in due course of time, can prove to be a threat to the water security of Pakistan. As of now, with its abeyance, India has effectively stopped sharing hydrological data which is crucial for lower riparian states and talks are in progress of continuing the construction of the Ratle Hydropower project as well.

3.2 China: Upstream Advantage and India's Water Security

"India's neighborhood policy is built on the understanding that our destinies are interlinked."

— Subrahmanyam Jaishankar

The Brahmaputra River, originating from Angsi Glacier near Mount Kailash in the Tibetan Plateau, serves as the main economic and ecological lifeline of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in India, sustaining spots like Majauli Island and the Kaziranga National Park as well as the Assam tea gardens while acting as a major waterway for trade and travel.

Known also as Yarlung Tsganpo in China, it traverses nearly 2900 Km of China's Tibet Autonomous region before entering India through Arunachal Pradesh where it is known as Sihang or Dihang. From there, upon merging with major tributaries such as the Dibang and Lohit in Assam, it assumes the name **Brahmaputra**, before eventually entering Bangladesh as the **Jamuna** and joining the Ganga and Meghna river systems.

In the past two decades, China has been effectively developing and expanding the infrastructure necessary for utilizing the potential hydropower of this river. In 2015, it commissioned the Zangmu Hydroelectric Project marking China's first major dam on the river. It has since been followed by projects such as **Jiacha**, **Jiexu**, **Dagu**, and **Lengda**, all primarily designed as **run-of-the-river hydropower** with Beijing repeatedly stating the purpose of the rivers as hydropower generation rather than river diversion.

Nevertheless, with China's Position as the Upper Riparian state, India has repeatedly raised concerns regarding the potential cumulative impact of this project, affecting both India and China.

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With the project being built on Seismic Zone VI (high risk) along with the Medog Fault and Himalayan Frontal Thrust located in its proximity, it raises the issue of earthquake induced flooding as well as China's credibility with meticulous construction as opposed to past projects (**e.g., in the Neelum-Jhelum project in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir**), leaving little room for error.

Additionally, recent attempts to restore bilateral trust and people-to-people communication are undermined by aggressive hydropower expansion. During this period of precarious diplomatic thaw, projects close to problematic areas send unfavorable signals.

Talks to revive the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra have just resumed between China and India. If water issues continue to erode public and political trust, such programs may come to a standstill.

To combat this, India can expand the avenue of the joint river commission of the Brahmaputra Basin currently between India and Bangladesh, to China as well so that all riverain states are consulted and accordingly can cooperate with each other.

Additionally, India **can explore models like the Indus Water Treaty** to foster a cooperative framework with China for the Brahmaputra Basin as well as invest in advanced hydrological studies and monitoring systems along the Brahmaputra, ensuring it can better assess water flow, sediment patterns, and environmental impact downstream.

3.3 India-Nepal : The Dilemma in the Himalayas

“Neighbourhood First is not just a slogan. It is a practical manifestation of the importance of standing by each other, of helping each other out, of actually building a larger neighbourhood.”

— Subramanyam Jaishankar

The Indo-Nepal riverine relations is a demonstration of how transboundary rivers have shifted its form from a shared natural resource to a strategic instrument in the region. Historically, the river served as a natural boundary between the two countries as well as a natural resource since the 1816 Treaty of Saugali, while cooperation has been maintained through multiple treaties and agreements in the past seven decades. Nepal

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contributes 46% of the annual flow of the Ganges and around 71% during lean season, making it essential to India's food and water security, simultaneously creating a strong point for bilateral cooperation. In recent times, Nepal has claimed regions beyond the agreed border marked by the Mahakali river, since the river has changed its flow, and also questioned unequal benefit sharing and the perception that most agreements benefit India's downstream interests.

India's long-term approach reflects its strategic efforts to secure access to Himalayan waters through phased developments, while Nepal lags behind to have any efforts likewise. Hydro-securitisation is the central aspect of India's strategic plan in this region, as India links it with national security, energy security and retains a strong influence in the region. This enables India to integrate hydropower, flood management, data-sharing, and cross-border infrastructure under the scope of Neighbourhood First policy, bolstering regional interdependence while simultaneously maintaining its influence. Thus, the Indo-Nepal river dispute is a result of strategic claims and efforts of the two states respectively, where India holds a strong position against the Nepalese claims in riverine diplomacy.

3.4 India-Bhutan: A Trusted Strategic Partnership

“India and Bhutan are made for each other”

— PM Narendra Modi

Indo-Bhutan relations serve as an example of how cooperation creates mutual gains rather than involving in disputes. Unlike its relation with Nepal, India has assisted multiple hydropower infrastructures in Bhutan making it the cornerstone of Indo-Bhutan relationship. Since 1960 India has financed, constructed and exported electricity from projects like Chukha, Tala and Mangdechhu, enabling Bhutan to harness its vast hydropower potential and generate export revenues. For India, these projects contribute to clean energy and energy security. Thus, Riverine relations are more of an economic and geopolitical partnership. Thus, Indo-Bhutan relationship demonstrates how mutual cooperation can function as a strategic asset in a bilateral relation and benefit both with interdependence and fostering mutual trust, offering a cooperative model in sharp contrast with India's riverine disputes with other neighbours.

3.5 India-Bangladesh: The Teesta Question

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“These rivers, folk tales about them, folk songs, have also been witness to our shared cultural heritage”

— PM Narendra Modi

The riverine relation between India and Bangladesh has centered around the Teesta river, originating from North Sikkim, flowing through West Bengal and then entering Bangladesh. The river is indispensable for irrigation, agriculture and livelihoods in northern Bangladesh, despite this the two countries have not concluded any agreement or treaty due to opposition from West Bengal, whose opinion becomes crucial in this context of inter-state river sharing. However, India uses this constraint as an advantage in regards to future agreements and negotiations, transforming Teesta from a water sharing issue to a strategic bargaining instrument. Bangladesh faces dry-seasons affecting the agricultural economy of the country, as well as ecological damages, reinforcing unequal benefit-sharing perspective towards India.

India firmly maintains its position that all developmental requirements should involve all stakeholders in the region, as a strategic method to delay negotiations and continue to use it as a strategic leverage. Consequentially, Bangladesh in recent times is shifting towards others, especially China, for development of riverine infrastructures and ports, as this becomes a crucial point for India's influence in the region. However, 1996 Ganges Water Sharing and JRCs continue to shape the bilateral relations between the two neighbours, India's management of the Teesta river reflects New Delhi's balanced and calculated approach to maintain regional stability, influence and shape Bangladesh's choices through transboundary water diplomacy.

4. Conclusion

India's transboundary riverine diplomacy is progressing towards a more strategic complexity due to evolving geopolitical conditions in the subcontinent, where shared rivers have become strategic instruments in maintaining a strong influence and hold in the region alongside traditional concerns of water management. India being a lower riparian to China, Nepal and Bhutan and upper riparian to Bangladesh, maintains a unique position that requires careful balancing of policy to ensure both security and cooperation. The construction of upstream dams by China, periodic debates over water treaties, prolonged negotiations with the other neighbours have created an intertwined situation of strategic competition, diplomatic leverage and power projection. India, currently is passing through several issues and challenges while competitors like China

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is rapidly strengthening its presence in the South Asian waters, compelling India to rethink on its Neighbourhood First policy.

The future course of India's transboundary river diplomacy thus depends on how it rethinks and restructures its strategic policies, and moves beyond traditional agreements and builds a framework integrating security and cooperation. Utilising natural sources like rivers becomes a crucial instrument in geopolitics, as observed India is maintaining its stronghold against Pakistan, but at the same time its delays with Bangladesh and dispute with Nepal brings them close with China which becomes a central security concern. While on one side it is being used as leverage, India should reinvest its focus to consolidate its relations into one of cooperation with the other two neighbours to keep the 'dragon' at a distance.

However, it is important to note that use of the natural resources also contributes to the accelerating impacts of climate change, directly bringing regional economies under the risk of getting damaged. Climate concerns take a backseat in this evolving geopolitical competition where every state seeks to consolidate their national interests. In such an evolving landscape, India must take a parallel concern of its strategic interests as well as climate concern being a leading nation of the globe, moving beyond treaty-centric approach to adaptive, climate-resilient governance. Strengthening cooperation and building mutual trust, India can transform its shared rivers from sources of competition to enduring instruments of stability, sustainability and cooperation.

5. References

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