China's Hydro Hegemony and Strategic Contestation over the Brahmaputra River Basin

Sailika Chamling[1] *and Phairembam Newton Singh*[2]

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Brahmaputra river, one of Asia's significant transboundary rivers, as an emerging site of geopolitical contention between China and India in South Asia. The study examines how the river, which is vital to the environment and humanity, has become a contested resource marked by major power asymmetries and the absence of hydro diplomacy among the riparian countries. The study also examines how China's constant upstream unilateral activities increase strategic competition between China and the lower riparian countries, especially, India. China's strategic move and the responses by the lower riparian countries define the issues of hydro politics in the Brahmaputra basin. The study argues China as a hydro-hegemon in terms of how it links water politics to border disputes, security and also by its dominance in hydro infrastructure vis-a-vis the riparian countries. By linking their strategic interest with the -Brahmaputra River, China largely determines the hydro-political issues with the riparian countries. India's responses are largely influenced by major concerns that vary from environmental issues, water scarcity to geopolitical issues. The study recommends a need for hydro diplomacy with a shift from water security to cooperative inter-governmental water governance.

Keywords: *India, China, Brahmaputra River Basin, Hydro Diplomacy, Hydro Politics, Hydro Hegemony, Geopolitics.*

INTRODUCTION

Rivers have been a vital to human civilization throughout history, a source of living, drinking water, transportation, development, food, and sustaining agriculture and irrigation till date. With 40% of the population dependent on the transboundary rivers, crossing national sovereign boundaries, they become transboundary rivers, bringing both opportunities and challenges for their riparian states (Braga, 2014). A transboundary river is defined as a river

[1]Research Scholar, Department of International Relations, Sikkim University. (**ORCID ID :** 0009-0002-7368-5197)
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Sikkim University. Email: pnsingh@cus.ac.in (**ORCID ID :** 0009-0009-4223-3703)

whose freshwater is shared by two or more riparian countries through which it flows, in which the actions of one country can affect the water politics, hydrology, and use of the river water by other countries (Wolf A. T., 1999). Approximately 90% of the world's population shares transboundary water resources (rivers, lakes, and aquifers), and due to the growing scarcity of water worldwide, disparities in water flow among riparians have become a growing concern among countries (Gokcekus & Bolouri, 2023). The rivers with various uses, provides fresh water for sustenance, followed by water used for industrial purposes, irrigation and agricultural, domestic, and, mostly, the contemporary demands of hydro power generation used in multiple sectors (Kibaroglu, Wolfrum, Kirschner, & Mehring, 2013). In addition to their economic and ecological roles, transboundary rivers are strategically and politically significant. The power dynamics between the riparian states can be affected by control over transboundary water resources, particularly when water is scarce or distributed unevenly. A transboundary river's political aspect, sometimes known as hydro politics, results from the interaction of regional power disparities, national security, and water scarcity. The ability of upper riparian nations to regulate the river's flow rate and frequency gives them considerable influence over their lower riparian neighbours. This upstream advantage, which is essentially a phenomenon that can be observed globally in various transboundary agreements, can be leveraged by riparian states to negotiate broader political or economic concerns beyond water issues. This upstream advantage, which is essentially a phenomenon observable internationally in various transboundary river basins, can be leveraged by riparian states to negotiate larger political or economic concerns beyond water (Wolf A. T., 2007). The concept of hydro-hegemony highlights how upper riparian states utilize their dominance over water resources to enhance their political and economic leverage (Warner, Mirumachi, Farnum, Grandi, Menga & Zeitoun, 2017). The collaboration and stability of the riparian states can be significantly impacted by the strategic management of any transboundary river. Through the building of dams, water diversion, or hydroelectric projects, the upper riparian frequently has significant influence over its lower riparian. However, in order to safeguard their water security, lower riparian argue for equitable water sharing or seek international attention.

The works on the transboundary water issues and riparian contestation are often rooted in the country's national interest, environmental issues and

governmental challenges, among which water distribution and flow come first. However, environmental and ecological issues make the management of transboundary rivers even more difficult where both upper and lower riparian countries are influenced by climate change, which also intensifies water scarcity, flooding, and disrupts hydrological cycles globally. Apart from these issues, lower riparians also come across various forms of pollution (industrial, mining, etc), altering the quality of fresh water and posing transboundary environmental hazards.

Transboundary water resources are a zone for contestation, but they also offer opportunities for cooperation in the area. The principle of equitable and reasonable utilisation seeks to balance the interests of all riparian states. However, the only concern that remains is the geopolitical disputes, lack of trust, national interest and unilateral interests of countries against its riparian countries (Wehling, 2020).

Transboundary rivers exemplify the intricate interplay between the environment, society, and politics. They are crucial for human survival, economic development of a country, and ecological balance, yet they also present complex challenges due to competing national interests of the riparian states, environmental pressures, and governance gaps. The transboundary rivers require a multidisciplinary approach and effective management based on cooperation, trust, and adherence to international legal norms by the riparian states. As pressures on water resources deepen globally, the governance of transboundary rivers will gradually determine regional stability, ecological resilience, and human well-being, making them central in the 21st century.

HYDRO-POLITICS AND TRANSBOUNDARY RIVERS

Water is increasingly seen as a ‘power’, a ‘weapon', and there is a growing securitisation of water. It is speculated that petrostates with abundant natural resources, such as hydropower potential, will encounter both intra-state and inter-state issues and conflict, particularly because the idea of energy sources is becoming more and more intertwined with the developmental concept for the states in the international arena. With the target of most states to decarbonise by a specific year of their own, the pressure on water to become the new fuel for development, industrial and economic growth of a state has become vital. As Ismail Serageldin suggested in 1995, “the war of the next century will be about water” (Sovacool & Walter, 2018). It has also

been stated that water has become the most used, extracted, and employed resource in the world. While the water conflict is generally related to border, economy, and national interests of any country (Chellaney, 2014). The concern for water security is gaining more attention over the years now, and it is generally defined as having an acceptable quality and quantity of fresh water for general use by humans, and also an acceptable amount of water related concerns to the environment, humans and economy (Pak, 2016).

In the contemporary era, water, particularly transboundary water, has become a highly contested issue between sovereign states. Transboundary rivers, not only for the importance of their hydropower potential, but also for geopolitical, social, and economic aspects, act both as a prospect for cooperation as well as conflict between the riparian states (Manhas & Yadav, 2024). Internationally, 60 per cent of the fresh water is transboundary in nature, and almost 150 countries globally share this transboundary water, making it political in nature. However, most of the issues among the countries are related to transboundary waters as they hold immense potential for a sovereign country (Keskinen, Hakkinen, Haapala, & Sharipova, 2023). Nevertheless, sharing such a resource is equivalent to sharing power, economy, and national interest. Similarly, it has been noted by many scholars that such transboundary issues lead to the study of hydro-politics, and similarly, it has been observed that with hydro diplomacy, these conflicts and issues can be lessened or may act as a catalyst for cooperation between the riparian countries.

THE BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER BASIN AS A SITE OF CONTESTATION

A striking example of hydro-politics amongst the transboundary rivers is the Brahmaputra River in South Asia, which originates in China's Tibet Autonomous Region, flows through India's Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, and finally enters Bangladesh. Chinese construction of hydropower dams and water diversion projects has raised concerns in the lower riparian, India and Bangladesh about potential hazards of the flow of the water, flood risks, and ecological damage. The Brahmaputra River is one of the most important transboundary rivers of the world. Having its origin in the Tibet Autonomous Region (China), this region of origin itself and the river serve as a lifeline to all the riparian population. It flows through four countries: China, India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh (Manhas & Yadav, 2024). Originating in the

Himalayan ranges, it flows towards the southern region of China, making way to enter the eastern region of India, then enters Bangladesh and, finally emptying itself in the Bay of Bengal (Nepal & Shrestha, 2015). The place of its origin has an elevation of 5300m with a total length of the basin of 2880km (Dutta, Hinge, Marak, & Sharma, 2021).

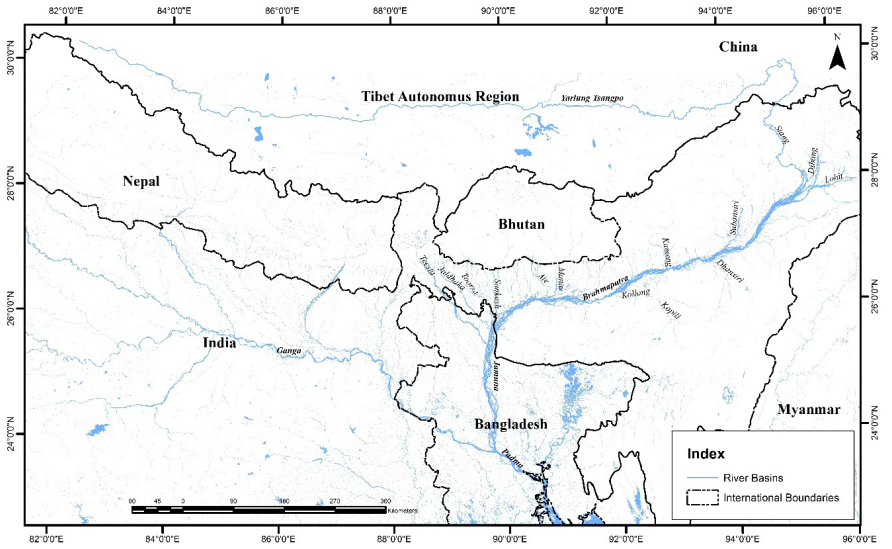

Figure 1: Map prepared by using ArcGIS, showing the Brahmaputra River Basin.

China's Medog Hydropower project, sanctioned in December 2024 and started construction in mid-2025, has been stated to become the world's largest and a major hydropower project, with a capacity of 60 GW and a predicted annual production of 300 billion kWh, perhaps three times more than the Three Gorges Dam (Zhang, 2025). The large-scale project has evoked fears in the Indian government, with internal government assessments warning it could limit and control the river flow in the lower riparians during the dry and monsoon seasons, potentially enabling water to be used as geopolitical leverage (Master & Shen, 2025). Ever since Chinese upstream hydro activity has inversely affected lower riparian states, India's diplomatic active response has included calls for transparency and reviving seasonal MoUs on hydrological data sharing agreements, which, since their initiation in 2002, have been on the edge and irregular in their continuity. In fact, hydrological data sharing was suspended amid rising bilateral tensions in 2023, and even

these simple forms of cooperation made India sceptical of the Chinese hydro activities in the river basin and a greater threat to itself.

The River Brahmaputra has been and will in the future be used by both countries to influence the geopolitics of South Asia. India sees China's massive hydro infrastructural expansion along the upper Yarlung Tsangpo like Zangmu Dam, Jiacha Dam, the Three Gorges Dam and, now the massive Medog dam (other minor construction is always active), as a geopolitical move. India's deployment of military troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Arunachal Pradesh's Tawang, Walong, and Upper Siang can be seen as dictated by this geopolitical consideration, where control over these critical regions becomes necessary for border surveillance and strategic concerns. India, being situated between China and Bangladesh, holds a peculiar position in the Brahmaputra River Basin of a middle riparian country, making it a vital player in the river geopolitics (Pandit, 2022). The relationship between the two upper riparian countries of the Brahmaputra shares a critical issue due to their border and the contested regions. India is also responding with hydro infrastructure constructions in its northeast states of approximately 14,069 megawatts, of which 14 are to be in Arunachal Pradesh and the largest one being the Etalin hydropower project, Lower Siang project, and Demwe Lower project of 3,097 MW, 2,700 MW, and 1,750 MW respectively. However, the proposed Subansiri Hydroelectric project and Siang Project have been opposed by the locals of the state in the dam building, will now be commissioned in May 2026 (Baruah, Barua, & Vij, 2022).

China's upstream activities also affect the livelihood and security of the northeastern states of India, where these regions depend severely on the river water for agricultural purposes, fisheries, irrigational uses, hydropower generation, and social and cultural aspects. India's strategic concern rises from the region's vulnerability, where a fragile ecological balance and limited infrastructure make the Northeast highly sensitive to any upstream alteration by China, and the region's social and cultural beliefs, porous borders, and economic underdevelopment create further challenges. Though China claims that the hydropower dams as a run-of-the-river projects, which doesn't allow the storage of large volumes of water, causing the alteration in the flow of the river and the water, India is still sceptical because there is a potential for manipulating the flow quantity during critical agricultural necessities or flooding periods, also due to its close proximity and China's claims of

sovereignty over contested areas.

Extensive infrastructure development in the Tibet region, with rapid troop deployment near the LAC, creates geopolitical concerns for India, which can be interpreted as hydrological and defence infrastructure as part of a broader strategy to dominate South Asia in the future through resource capture and geopolitical advantage.

Being neighbours, interdependence and trust are necessary elements in transboundary water sharing, but the management of the transboundary river basin remains ineffective between India and China. The problem and issue lie in the management of the river basin. Agriculture is one of the vital sectors in the basin economy, where almost 60 per cent of the total national water is consumed in agricultural production. The river sustains every living being and the huge biodiversity throughout its river basin, yet cooperation between China and India remains limited to a provisional hydrological data sharing, where there are only limited notifications and the absence of a basic permanent governance institution for the Brahmaputra River.

CHINA'S HYDRO-HEGEMONY AND STRATEGIC INTEREST IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER BASIN

The politics of the Brahmaputra River, among the transboundary rivers in Asia, exposes how a natural resource has become deeply entangled with questions of sovereignty, security, and regional order. In International Relations, 'hegemony' is not verbally used by countries, but can be seen using it in various forms in dealing with one another. It is a concept used in describing dominance (negatively) or leadership (positively). Hegemony in earlier decades was used in a form of force, basically in a form of military and war, but in the contemporary era, other forms of hegemony, like diplomacy, soft power, and ideas, are used (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006).

Hydro-hegemony is linked with water power politics. Hydro-hegemony occurs when water from one sovereign country crosses the international border and enters another sovereign country, making the transboundary river a political tool or a political issue, making it a source of dispute and disagreement. It is a term used to describe a powerful country in regard to its management, control, and position in the transboundary river (Warner, et al., 2017). Power is an instrument of hegemony, and three types of power can be classified according to Zeitoun and Warner in the realm of transboundary

water resources. The first one classifies itself with shared power with the riparian countries, where some form of cooperation or complete cooperation exists. The second kind is a consolidated or combined one, which explains when two riparian countries share a moderate form of cooperation where both countries have equal amounts of power relations, and here the level of competition is less but probable. However, the third one is contested, where the relationship between the riparian countries is aggressive and competitive at the same time, and cooperation is zero, backed by trust issues and security concerns (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006).

The major features of a hydro-hegemon are its riparian position, its power position in comparison with the riparian countries, and the potential exploitation of the water resources from the transboundary rivers (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006). Perhaps, the nature of the issues of water and water conflict is also greatly defined by the hydro-hegemon state. Hydro-hegemon is a powerful status in the international arena, and this position not only gives the power to control and manage the transboundary river, but it also lets the hegemon enjoy the powerful status whereby its co-riparian, who might as well be equally powerful, needs to be submissive in matters of transboundary water resources.

Hydro-hegemony is a diplomatic tool to identify the issue in the relationship of the riparian countries. It helps to identify the hidden politics of water related issues and conflicts where there exists power asymmetry among the riparian countries. Hydro-hegemony acts as a lens for understanding how power and water politics function. The upper riparian (hydro-hegemon) always tends to shape the politics of the transboundary basin and its riparian countries. However, the lower riparian countries are left to adapt and seek cooperation in the riparian basin, which either never works or is very slow in the process (Arynova, 2019). According to scholars such as Frederick Frey (1993) have earlier argued that in a riparian relationship decision making is one of the major elements that is generally taken up by the hegemon. However, among the riparian countries, chances of cooperation and stable relations are generally low if the hegemon is an upper riparian whereas chances are probably high when the hegemon is situated in as a lower riparian country where the need and interests meets (Vij, 2025).

Chinese position as an upper most riparian to the basin gives it an inherent hydrological advantage, which has been systematically and strategically

reinforced through large-scale infrastructural hydro power projects in the basin. Beijing has ever since pursued an ambitious dam-building agenda under its development and national interest, aimed at accelerating economic growth and integrating it with tackling water issues of its population. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam and Zangmu Dam, after many small-scale dams, operational since 2003 and 2015 respectively, marked large-scale hydropower station on the Yarlung Tsangpo by the Chinese government and marked the foundation of a broader hydropower strategy, which further combines its control and management over the river in its upper sovereign regions. The most controversial, however, is the proposed Medog hydropower project, fairly to be operational around 2030's is the world's largest hydropower project, which aims to generate approximately 60 gigawatts of electricity, nearly double the capacity of the Three Gorges Dam (Janos, J., Bogardi, Salame, Nooijen, Kumar, Tingsanchali, Bahaduri & Kolechkina, 2021).

China, as the upper riparian, occupies an advantage in controlling the flow of the Brahmaputra due to its position, and this asymmetry in its position allows China to exercise its hegemony over India and Bangladesh. China practices a form of strategic veil by constructing mega hydro dams and hydro projects without fully disclosing its scope (Shanta, 2018). For India, this asymmetry in riparian position develops deep insecurity, while China regularly reassures that all its dams are run-of-the-river and that the water is not stored or hinders the flow of the river water. India, however, perceives them as potential tools for future leverage and power over its riparian states.

The two billion population of South and Southeast Asia is dependent on the rivers originating from Tibet which gives China an upper hand in Asia's water security. China, with its serious water crisis, has been making ways to sustain its water needs for various purposes in many ways, like building hydro power infrastructures and by diverting river waters. This has caused its riparian states to have serious water concerns and can potentially create a water crisis in its lower riparian states.

China's upstream activities are catalysing India's concern over the Brahmaputra River Basin. While the growing hydrological, military, economic, and infrastructural presence of China near the border regions has raised concerns for India. Water concerns have become part of India's broader strategic contention with China. Although water remains a sensitive topic, it is increasingly present in India's strategic narrative about China**.** In 2020,

the Chinese government officially announced plans to construct a massive hydropower project at Medog County in the Tibet Autonomous Region, China, near the Great Bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo, Brahmaputra(Giordano & Wahal, 2023). This announcement had immediately elevated tension and pressure between India and China. The announcement of its construction in July 2025 has raised a wave of panic in India, not just because of the project's size, which is believed to surpass even the Three Gorges Dam by three times, but also because of its proximity to the border region of Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as "South Tibet".

The Medog dam proposal has since become a turning point in India's strategic rethinking for transboundary governance, regional security, and foreign policy. The proposed Medog dam is situated just before Yarlung Tsangpo takes a U-shaped sharp turn around the Namcha Barwa (India) range and enters India as the Siang River, a major tributary of the Brahmaputra (Manhas & Yadav, 2024). This region is geographically significant for many reasons. Firstly, it is in close proximity to the Indian border with China, which raises security concerns. Secondly, as the dam is the closest to the region when it enters Northeast India, the Chinese government will have full leverage over the river on how and of what quantity it enters the Indian territory. Lastly, being in a critical seismic zone over the Himalayas, China's construction of enormous hydro infrastructures within its country will have a significant impact on its neighbours in an environmental sense, raising concerns for a natural disaster to occur, which is due to the anthropogenic activities.

The Global Times (Chinese media) in 2020 described the Medog project as part of China's national energy security strategy and a leap towards green, sustainable development. However, Indian scholars interpreted this differently as a potential tool of leverage that could weaponize water and hinder the flow to India's disadvantage. Apart from clean energy, employment opportunities, and infrastructure, what are the drawbacks that the world's largest dam in a fragile region will bring to the host country, along with its neighbours, is what the international concern lies in. Economic benefits and green sustainable development are not just what China is looking forward to; perhaps a balance in its hydro-power and unilateral management is what China's hidden objectives could possibly be.

The effects of the Three Gorges Dam hampered the rotation of the Earth. However, the Medog Dam, when completed, will generate and replace the

Three Gorges Dam with thrice as much energy from the station, which is more than the annual power output of Britain (Chen, 2025).

INDIA'S CONCERNS AND THE STRATEGIC RESPONSES

India has now been concerning deeply regarding China's interest in the Brahmaputra River Basin. The fear of losing the volume and water quality from the river deeply disturbs India, concerning about is population as well as highlighting the contribution of Brahmaputra River in Bangladesh. The major concern of India over Chinese activities on the river is weaponization of the transboundary river to gain leverage on the conflict, particularly the one that is geopolitical in nature. This leverage and control threaten the socio-economic stability of the lower riparian states.

The issue of environmental challenges in the lower riparian zone escalates with growing Chinese interest in the river basin. The construction of the hydropower infrastructure and the recent Medog dam greatly hampers the natural flow and the availability of the river water, which hinders the biodiversity and social patterns of India's northeast states. It also brings about water scarcity, seasonal drought, and flooding as well as issues in agricultural productivity in the lower riparian states.

India has not been able to manage a legally binding treaty with China on the Brahmaputra (like the Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan, which lasted for more than 60 years amidst border conflicts and heavy issues of terrorist attacks). Its diplomatic approach is cautious, largely because India itself is hesitant to accept international mediation in transboundary water disputes. Therefore, in the suspicion over Chinese intentions, India has gradually planned to rely on its own monitoring capabilities, including satellite surveillance to track activities on its international borders, dam construction, and coastlines, where, among the total of 52 surveillance satellites, ISRO will manufacture 21 satellites, and 31 will be handled by the private companies. India seems sceptical of solely relying on Chinese-provided hydrological data as indecisive and risky, especially after the 2017 Doklam standoff when Beijing suspended hydrological data-sharing (Vishwanath, 2018). The Indian government is striving for technical independence in monitoring the hydro infrastructures and hydro activities on the Brahmaputra River basin.

India's most striking strategic response was to build dams of its own on the Brahmaputra in Arunachal Pradesh by establishing hydropower projects,

and to strengthen its legal and political claim to the river**.** However, India claims that if it does not use the water flows for its national interest, then it might strengthen China’s leverage more in the basin and therefore, by constructing hydropower projects in Arunachal Pradesh, India's strategic reactions will show that it will not passively accept China’s dominance. India also increasingly perceives the river not just as a transboundary issue but as part of the larger India-China bilateral relations, which are inversely related to each other, where primarily water and sovereignty are interlinked in India’s geopolitics. India identifies China’s hydropower dam construction as a matter of concern, for transparency and ecological risk to the lower riparian, emphasising laws from the UN Watercourses Convention (1997), such as Equitable and reasonable utilization and participation, not to cause significant harm to the riparian states, regular exchange of data and information and Protection and preservation of ecosystems and prevention, reduction and control of pollution (Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses, 1997). This is how India disapproves of China’s unilateralism in the river basin without directly internationalising the open dispute, just so as to generally avoid its own flaws of not signing to any international law on the Brahmaputra River Basin.

Despite India’s concerns over Chinese activities in the upstream, India’s official response is often restrained to avoid escalating the water issue into open conflict with China, as the Brahmaputra dispute is deeply intertwined with the border issue between the two countries, and it claims that being forceful in the matter might provoke China to accelerate diversion projects and new projects as a counter effect. India’s prefers is to keep water dialogue within the broader framework of India-China relations rather than isolating it as a separate dispute which might never find its way to cooperation.

In the past decades or colonial times, dams were constructed for the reason of security in an increasingly populated country. It served an optimistic purpose of water storage and use to the host country, with less hindrance in the flow of the transboundary river to the riparian countries. Dams do bring about security in food and water to the population, but at the same time, they cause harm to the same population through environmental issues. India has spent about rupees 400,000 crores on dam building, and nearly 40 per cent of the budget is used for the Water Resource Department on dam maintenance (Pradhan & Srinivasan, 2022). National interest and the needs of a country allow management and governance of the flowing transboundary river within

its sovereign land, however, the same activities by the riparian country seem disturbing and a concern for others. The activities of the upper riparian are judged by how they communicate to the riparian countries, whether it uses force or diplomacy. The same activity can be portrayed as a dominance and cooperative riparian, with just how the country uses its communications method in dealing with its riparian countries.

Indian government have claimed that China, apart from controlling the flow of the river have also used it as a political tool against India. Instead of having a fair share of the river water by the riparian states China is ignorant of the problem faced by other riparian countries because of China affecting many factors downstream mainly agricultural sector and industrial sector followed by the result of flood more than China building hydro power infrastructures (Afzal, Yaseen, & Muzaffar, 2020). India's concern is dynamic in nature with upper riparian China's activities in the Brahmaputra River basin. From environment to biodiversity, climate change to water scarcity, social livelihood to economic stability, and majorly geopolitical interests to security issues with the Brahmaputra River.

LIMITATIONS OF HYDRO DIPLOMACY BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA

Hydro diplomacy can be broadly defined as a political process that uses water related knowledge and diplomatic instruments at various levels of diplomatic tracks to simultaneously reduce water related tensions and promote constructive interactions between transboundary riparian countries, allowing it to possibly view hydro diplomacy as a process which introduces hydro-politics and diplomacy in International Relations and also uses diplomacy and foreign policy as a tool for managing the relation between the riparian countries (Keskinen, et al.., 2023). Schmeier defined water diplomacy as "the use of diplomatic instruments to existing or emerging disagreements and conflicts over shared water resources with the aim to solve or mitigate those for the sake of cooperation, regional stability, and peace" (Schmeier, 2018).

In a transboundary basin, hydro diplomacy looks at the holistic interests of all the riparian states and not just the interests of the hydro hegemon. Not doing so have and will cause issues and less chances of cooperation and trust building among the riparian states (Gokcekus & Bolouri, 2023). Hydro-diplomacy offers diplomatic relations and is not about force, where it is used as a tool or an instrument to emphasize problem-solving, decoding

disagreements and conflicts. Hydro diplomacy is also a term used to describe various aspects of transboundary waters, like water scarcity, water conflicts, and water cooperation. The term has also highlighted the challenges and governance related to water. China's water scarcity issues have been central, and water resource management has been implemented by the government since the 1990s, however, the issues are still severe (Jiang, 2009). This insecurity of China has led the government to make optimal use of every transboundary river that flows through its international border. While the Chinese government acts on the transboundary rivers in its own sovereign land, the lower riparian states face immediate repercussions. With a sense of insecurity and trust issues between the two countries, the element of hydro diplomacy and its objectives are not even near among its riparian states on the Brahmaputra River.

Hydro diplomacy between India and China tumbles amid China's infrastructural assertiveness, fragile hydrological data sharing, border issues, domestic political pressure, and the lack of robust institutional frameworks. Until these structural deficiencies are addressed, diplomacy remains restricted, sensitive, and conflicted. Thus, hydro diplomacy fails because negotiations take place in an environment of power mistrust, and China does not want to weaken its upstream advantage through binding agreements, while India resists entering frameworks that recognise Chinese dominance. This dynamic produces a stalemate rather than meaningful cooperation.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses of 1997 is mainly relevant in the Brahmaputra case because it lays down core principles for governing the transboundary rivers and water, the major ones are from Part II Article 5-'Equitable and reasonable utilisation and participation' (all riparian states should use shared rivers fairly and sustainably, considering the needs of co-riparian states), Article 6-'Factors relevant to equitable and reasonable utilization' (geographic, socio-economic needs, population dependents, conservation are to be considered), Article 7- 'Obligation not to cause significant harm' (appropriate measures to prevent the instigating damage to other watercourse State), Article 9- 'Regular exchange of data and information', Part IV of Article 20- 'Protection and preservation of ecosystems' and Article 21- 'Prevention, reduction and control of pollution'. These principles, if adopted, could initiate the essence of cooperation and health of the Brahmaputra River Basin (Vinti, 2021).

The adoption of these laws in regulating the Brahmaputra River could serve as a platform for longstanding governance and diplomatic ties between India and China. Nevertheless, neither India nor China have been successful in ratifying the Convention themselves till date. Where China has always opposed to the bilateral or the multilateral regimes on transboundary rivers, and strictly claiming them as limitations to one's sovereignty and upstream rights to the flowing transboundary river. However, India might be concerned about equitable water sharing and use, but at the same time, India remains cautious about agreeing to the binding and obligatory transboundary laws and treaties. India restricts itself towards these bilateral and multilateral laws, which might later affect its own national interest related to water and hydro developments on the river Brahmaputra with China. This reflects how India and China are unwilling to participate in the shared cooperation and hydro diplomacy on the Brahmaputra issue.

CONCLUSION

The securitisation of water, where hydropower infrastructures and dam building on the Chinese side are perceived by India as less development initiatives and more as strategic instruments of leverage. China, a powerful player in the field of hydro infrastructures and the uppermost riparian in the Brahmaputra River basin, could bring about transformation in the hydro cooperation with its riparian countries. China perceives binding agreements as constraints on its sovereignty and upstream advantage on the basin. China's recent announcement of the Medong super dam has marked a milestone in the geopolitics of the Brahmaputra River Basin. As for India, these activities have resulted in more doubts and trust issues and have exposed the vulnerabilities of downstream dependence. While these rigid decisions and power balancing between India and China remain constrained by power asymmetry and diplomatic complexity, India is now determined that water concerns are a part of its strategy and diplomacy, not only as a transboundary resource to meet its national interests but also as a domain of geopolitical contestation and national resilience which needs attention.

China's dominant behaviour and upstream hydropower activities on the Brahmaputra River has forced a significant change in the direction of India's foreign policy towards China. Having initially attempted to initiate informal cooperation, temporary diplomacy, MoUs, and bilateral meetings, India has now shifted towards a more unilaterally structured and strategic approach to

transboundary water governance. With changing India's approach towards the Brahmaputra River management, a shift could be seen in the geopolitics of natural resources where rivers once seen as free flowing resources with less intervention, are now interlinked with concepts such as security, power disparity, sovereignty, national interest, environmental risks and so on. In response to Chinese upstream activity, the approach can be described as a mix of diplomatic considerations and infrastructural claims. On the one hand, India engages with China diplomatically through hydrological data sharing and probable bilateral talks over hydropower infrastructures, but maintains a distance from the binding treaties due to its own sovereignty concerns and autonomy over the river basin. India employs a balancing strategy, expanding its own hydropower projects in Arunachal Pradesh. This initiative aims to counter the threats posed by China's mega dams, promising development and security in the northeastern region, while enhancing surveillance and data independence, and strengthening downstream ties with Bangladesh. In this regard, India's strategy is reactive and defensive rather than what it really portrays, which is cooperation, where it seeks to counter against China's upstream leverage rather than resolving the mistrust between the two countries, which explains why hydro diplomacy remains negligible, and because of this Brahmaputra River continues to function as a strategic faultline rather than a boost for cooperation.

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