

## The Brahmaputra conundrum

“The Brahmaputra is an important resource for India’s own water diversion plans – the national river interlinking project.” The Brahmaputra river in Morigaon district, Assam. | Photo Credit: [Ritu Raj Konwar](#)

The news that China is planning to divert the waters of the Yarlung Tsangpo (the upper stream of India’s Brahmaputra) to its water-starved Xinjiang province is hardly surprising. It has been a long-standing part of the grand South-North Water Transfer project conceptualised as early as in the 1950s by Mao Zedong and somewhat grandly restated in Li Ling’s 2005 book *Tibet’s Water will Save China*.

### Understanding the Brahmaputra and the annual flooding in Assam

Indian and Bangladeshi water experts have, understandably, raised alarm bells over the plan for the adverse impacts it would have on downstream areas. For India, national security implications also follow as the Yarlung Tsangpo also flows into a disputed border region with China. Thus far, China has denied all claims of going ahead with the proposal on account of engineering difficulties and high-cost implications. However, as per the latest development, despite denials from the Chinese authorities, there is strong speculation that plans for a 1000 km-long tunnel are being tested in order to transfer water from the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet to Xinjiang. Given this mix of Chinese denial and Indian apprehension, how should Indian strategists react?

Understanding the Chinese psyche vis-à-vis its transboundary rivers and political relations is a prerequisite to informing the Indian response. There are four critical points that emerge from the history of interactions over water between China and India. One, the Brahmaputra agreement between China and India is a suboptimal arrangement within broader bilateral relations. As per the current agreement, China has thus far agreed to share hydrological data on the Yarlung Tsangpo/Brahmaputra (YTB) during the monsoon season. Why did China agree to cooperate in the first place when it has clearly resisted doing so for years, and with other riparian countries through which the Mekong flows? One of the explanations could be that this gesture of cooperation aligns well with China’s broader political strategy of portraying an image of a ‘responsible neighbour’. Despite two decades of negotiation, further cooperation on water, however, is in a state of a deadlock. The agreement, at best, is a piecemeal discount offered by China.

Two, discussions over the YTB have often been overshadowed by the border dispute. Sino-Indian history is replete with examples wherein despite tense bilateral relations, cooperation over transboundary rivers has occurred. For instance, despite border incursion by the Chinese army in the Depsang Valley in Ladakh in 2013, China and India went ahead to sign the extension of the 2002 Memorandum of Understanding on data sharing on the Brahmaputra river. However, there has been no progress in discussing more pressing issues of who has the right to how much water and the impact of dams and diversions on the upper reaches of the river. In the past couple of years, instances of border incursions before ministerial-level meetings between India and China have often been witnessed.

Three, departing from the past, China’s approach to transboundary water sharing is shifting towards multilateral arrangements. In 2015, China signed the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework along with five other countries through which the Mekong flows. This China-led multilateral agreement is an alternative to the Asian Development Bank-led Mekong River Commission, which China never signed. The LMC aligns with China’s Belt and Road Initiative and focuses on land and water connectivity, besides river management. In South Asia, China has been

insistent in establishing greater ties with Bangladesh on flood forecasting, water technologies, and water management. In 2016, a mainstream Chinese newspaper highlighted China's willingness towards multilateral cooperation on the YTB. India, on the other hand, prefers bilateral relations, as it has with Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. India and Bangladesh already have a stressed relationship over Teesta river sharing, whereas China is cooperating more with Bangladesh on water issues. China charges approximately \$125,000 for the data it provides to India; at the same time, it sends similar data to Bangladesh for free. By way of improving relationship with Bangladesh, China could well be aiming to encircle India to reach a deal on the sharing of YTB that favours China's objective of economic expansionism.

Four, the Indian approach to the YTB issue is influenced by developmental imperatives and domestic politics. The Brahmaputra is an important resource for India's own water diversion plans – the national river interlinking project – and is considered a powerhouse to meet India's energy demands in the future. India tends to play the lower riparian card to gain sympathy from its domestic political constituencies, especially of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Bangladesh and Pakistan have criticised India for being hypocritical in its approach with China, as India has been seen as an 'alleged bully' in sharing waters with them. While the concerns regarding Chinese diversion plans may be genuine, India also maintains the 'China threat' to a certain extent to veil its own administrative lapses and justify dam-building activities to its domestic audience.

A decade ago, India started planning multiple hydropower projects on the Brahmaputra as a reactive strategy against Chinese dam-building activities on the upper reaches of the river. This strategy is informed by the international law of 'prior appropriation', which states that the first user gets the rights to continue using that quantity of water.

India will need to be more adept in responding to Brahmaputra river-related issues. First, it needs to clearly envision the desired end goal and strategic outcomes for dealing with impending water conflicts. Second, it needs to de-emphasise China's role for the time being and restrengthen its relationship with Bangladesh. It needs to push the impending Teesta river agreement and restore its image as a responsible upper riparian. Third, India needs to mirror its strength and firmness in negotiations with China on water rights, as it did in the case of the Doklam stand-off and in opposing the Belt and Road Initiative, rather than projecting itself as a victim.

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The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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