

‘CAREFULLY MONITORING’ BRAHMAPUTRA DEVELOPMENTS: INDIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

A view of river Yarlung Zangbo, as the Brahmaputra is known in Tibet.

India on Thursday said it “carefully monitors all developments on the Brahmaputra” river, even as Beijing said it was its “legitimate right” to develop hydropower projects on the lower reaches of the river.

A State-run Chinese hydropower firm, POWERCHINA, is planning to build the first downstream dam on the Brahmaputra, known as the Yarlung Zangbo in Tibet.

Officials from the firm said last week that they were eyeing the enormous potential of the river’s “Great Bend” just across the border from Arunachal Pradesh in Tibet’s Medog county, where the river falls over a 2,000-metre drop before turning to flow into India. While China in 2015 operationalised its first hydropower project at Zangmu in Tibet and is constructing three other dams at Dagu, Jiexu and Jiacha, these are run-of-the-river dams on the upper and middle reaches. The proposed new dam is also likely to be a run-of-the-river hydropower project that will not divert water, but will be the first on the lower reaches.

On Thursday, China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said “it is China’s legitimate right to carry out hydropower station development in the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo river.”

“China has always held a responsible attitude towards the development and utilisation of cross-border rivers and adopted the policy of simultaneously developing and protecting cross-border rivers,” she said. “Any project we undertake will go through scientific planning and research and we fully consider the impact on the downstream areas, taking into account the interests of both the upstream and the downstream. At present, the development of a hydropower station at the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo river is still in the early planning and research stage, and there is no need to interpret too much into it.”

It remains unclear whether technical feasibility studies will allow construction to go ahead, as POWERCHINA is not the first company to propose a downstream dam and previous projects did not take off.

Ms. Hua said China had “for a long time carried out good cooperation with India and Bangladesh in flood reporting, flood control, disaster relief, and emergency management” and “will maintain communication with India and Bangladesh through existing channels”.

Asked about China’s plans, External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said at his weekly briefing that the “government carefully monitors all developments on the Brahmaputra river.”

User rights

“As a lower riparian State with considerable established user rights to the waters of the trans-border rivers, the government has consistently conveyed its views and concerns to the Chinese authorities and has urged them to ensure that the interests of downstream States are not

harmful by any activities in upstream areas,” he said. “The Chinese side has conveyed to us on several occasions that they are only undertaking run-of-the-river hydropower projects which do not involve diversion of the waters of the Brahmaputra. Various issues relating to trans-border rivers are discussed with China under the ambit of an institutionalised Expert Level Mechanism which was established in 2006, as well as through diplomatic channels. We intend to remain engaged with China on the issue of trans-border rivers to safeguard our interests.”

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