

Water Diplomacy: New means of Peace in South Asia

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Abstract:

South Asia, per se, faces several key internal challenges that stem from internal as well as external sources. These include poverty, underdevelopment, insurgency, environmental degradation, inadequate resources, cross-border terrorism, fundamentalism, illegal migration, arms races, territorial disputes, and so on. All these issues severely affected the region as it pose a serious threat to peace and integrity in the region.

As mentioned above, the area has plugged into volatility. Another major source of political contestation facing by the region is the transboundary water disputes. At present, with more than 1.857 billion¹ population in the subcontinent, or about one-fourth² of the global population is suffering from water woes. Although freshwater is in abundance as the key three rivers basins namely Ganges, the Indus, and the Brahmaputra rivers originate from the Himalayas which cross through South Asia. These river basins not only support drinking water, irrigation and hydropower but also key economic development depending on these natural resources. Ironically, one of the most water-stressed regions in the world. In recent years, the shared rivers basins turning into a source of regional conflict.

In this framework, the paper is an attempt to articulates why transboundary water management over a while has caused geopolitical tensions among the countries of South Asia? Since the transboundary water issues are a serious threat to peace and stability in the region. Therefore, this study is based on the hypothesis that water diplomacy can play an important role in preventing and mitigating water disputes in the region. The paper concludes with the suggestions to provide opportunities for transboundary water cooperation towards achieving the objective of 'Positive Peace' through water diplomacy for the sake of cooperation and regional stability..

Keywords: Conflict, Diplomacy, Peace, South Asia, Transboundary, Water.

INTRODUCTION

The South Asian region comprises eight countries namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. These states are a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The region is counted as one of the poorest and densely populated inhabited by 1.857 billion people in the world. These countries are heavily dependent on transboundary water resources to meet the rapidly rising domestic and industrial demands.

Nevertheless, the subcontinent has enormous water flows through the major transboundary rivers basins such as the Indus, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. These rivers pass through China, India and Bangladesh before draining into the Bay of Bengal. The zone is water-rich sources are consist of the Beas, Brahmaputra, Chenab, Gandaki, Ganges, Indus, Jhelum, Kabul, Kosi, Mahakali, Ravi, Sutlej and Teesta rivers etc. Ironically, amidst the abundance of water, but many of these perennial rivers are facing severe water shortages due to disturbances in rainfall patterns.

Therefore, freshwater resources as a non-traditional security issue make the region highly vulnerable since the demand has escalated dramatically in recent decades, especially due to rapid population growth

and extensive industrialisation. Moreover, the most worrying and markedly politicised element that has given rise to disputes among countries is shared river basins.

According to a report Aqueduct Water Risk, 2019 released by the World Resources Institute (WRI) states that 17 countries in total are facing “Extremely High” levels of baseline water stress were from the Middle East and North Africa region. These are Qatar, Israel, Lebanon, Iran, Jordan, Libya, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, UAE, San Marino, Bahrain, Turkmenistan, Oman, and Botswana. Whereas among two South Asian countries – India (13 rank) and Pakistan (14 rank) are under water-stressed countries in the order of their rankings. The issue of water resource depletion is particularly acute in these two countries. According to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)_Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) satellites³, the Indus Basin aquifers of India and Pakistan are “most overstressed” in the world.

CHALLENGES

The largely debated and often disputed water sharing issues are compounded by multifaceted levels of challenges. The countries are facing increasing social and economic water-related immediate impacts through agricultural difficulties due to water scarcity. In addition, it will continue to be a growing demand for energy due to rapid industrialisation. The region, however, pressing deep environmental implications as well. This has led to strained tensions within the intra-regional relations of the province. Thereby, transboundary water sharing that has become a long-standing politically contested issue in the region.

Firstly, the region has experienced significant environmental changes. The biophysical environment is associated with a broad spectrum of fluctuations in climate in the mountain region of the Hindu-Kush Himalayan. Consequently, climate variability poses potential risks for a wide range of human and environmental systems such as a change in the water cycle. This is driven by an increase in evaporation, precipitation, extreme rainfall, flood, droughts, shorter snowfall and runoff. This also leads to the melting of a glacier in the Himalayas which resulting changes in river flow. Thus, the availability of water freshwater resources is affected during the lean summer season when the water demand is at its highest. Conversely, in the coastal areas, there has been an increase in sea level rise and tropical cyclone-related rainfall and storm surges i.e. the devastating effects of coastal flooding.

Secondly, the extent and nature of existing transboundary water treaties are also weak in terms of their water mandate, provisions, monitoring, integrated planning, policy framework, poor resources, compliance and enforcement mechanisms. In consideration of the fact that the ‘Hydro-Politics’ is witnessed in the context of India and Pakistan on Indus (Indus Waters Treaty of 1960) and India, Bangladesh on Farakka (Ganges Water Sharing Treaty of 1996), India-Nepal on Mahakali (Mahakali Treaty 1996) and India-Bhutan on Tala, Chukha and Kurichu (Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation of 1949, later revised in 2007). In contrast, till now, there are no formal water-sharing agreements that regulate the distribution of water between India and China on the Brahmaputra, likewise between Pakistan and Afghanistan on the Kabul River. Later, the absence of non-legally binding systems is a critical barrier and makes the existing system more precarious, insecure, uncertain, and unpredictable.

Thirdly, there is a lack of consensus on equitable distribution and sharing of river water between upstream and downstream riparian states. This also impacts the downstream region and makes them in a disadvantageous and vulnerable position. This hampers sustainable, fair and efficient water governance.

Fourthly, the major problem lies in the fundamental absence of trust between the countries. An integration and vision are absent for water sharing. Hence, the prevailing trends gave rise to non-cooperation in the region. Co-management strategy rivers basins for the mutual benefit of all is also lacking in the area.

Lastly, absence of effective institutional arrangements on the issue of water governance. These institutional interventions help to shape water-related decision-making as a response to social-environmental issues. In consequence, the absence of guiding principles and other international frameworks the upstream state's misuse or exercise on the grounds of sovereign rights of usage of river water.

Thus, one of the most important foreign policy issues confronting South Asia is the controversy over transboundary water governance. These shared river resources are under intense pressure from domestic, industrial and agricultural purposes. Water as a 'shared challenge' continues to be the bone of contention in the wider geopolitical context.

RETHINKING TRANSBOUNDARY THROUGH WATER DIPLOMACY

Against this background, with the complexities and scale of the encounters, it is imperative to address the deteriorating water-sharing situation as the region is under immense pressure due to the growing problem of transboundary water management. Thereby, water diplomacy needs to meet these challenges side-by-side by comprising the following suggestions as a part of the water resources inventory.

Conflict Management

Conflict Management is the de-escalating tool of conflict through which negative outcomes can be minimised. Similarly, the transboundary water sharing and increasing conflict between the countries is linked to resource management as a cause of conflict which can be resolved by applying broad approaches such as negotiation, mediation, nonviolent resistance, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, transitional justice, and reconciliation.

The multi-level water *governance* structures can play a vital role in transboundary water management. This includes regional agreements, conventions, treaties, or other formal measures. Hence, regulation and other systematic arrangements are the determining factors in the management of transboundary water resources. In the absence of rules and procedures for managing different users and interests, there is a high possibility that further disputes may occur in the future.

At present, it is undoubtedly the only region without any regional mechanism for the sharing of the transboundary rivers. *Regional institutional arrangements* need to develop prerequisites for the success of the regional-level of water resource planning and development. This instrument will help to address the issues of unfair distribution of water resources by setting up a minimum set of benchmarks and norms.

Consequently, these agencies through global water partnership can help to strengthen regional integration.

There is an increasing call for more *collaborative programmes* at the regional scale towards constructive cooperation such as joint research activities on water security. Hence, there is a huge scope to promote a multilateral alliance with potential partners in concrete ways. However, this is generally viewed as a long-term process to develop confidence in the process. Broadly speaking, basin-wide integrated collaborations are often complicated by geopolitical concerns. While such cooperation is difficult, yet it requires the building of trust between parties for the equitable and reasonable utilisation of water resources. Therefore, countries need to adopt an approach as a manifestation of commitments to cooperation by establishing joint management for transboundary water management

There is a need to create a *forum* to sustainably optimise the protection, development, conservation, managing and use of natural resources through a broad-based regional discourse. It should be an

inclusive, open and transparent process, for example, the Bridge River Dialogue. It provides a new way of conceptualising 'Positive Peace' by involving various stakeholders as such dialogue facilitates sustainable water cooperation among all SAARC countries.

In addition, a *data-sharing management system* like Joint Commission should be formed through which the dissemination of hydrological information can be shared among the SAARC countries. This could be an innovative way to access and regularly exchange data on water resources. As a result, the suitable water status will help in developing a better water policy.

Another flashpoint for water security is Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) river basin where these three major waterways merge with various tributaries. The basin is at risk according to a 2016 UN-commissioned study. Thus, to overcome, *International organisations* such as the World Bank alike can make a significant contribution to hydro-diplomacy in transboundary river basins.

Lastly, countries of South Asia have not been able to achieve inclusive and sustainable results without the political commitment to the transboundary river basin as a way to move forward.

Positive Peace: Rivers of Peace

The keystone concept of Positive Peace was developed by the Norwegian sociologist, Johan Galtung also known as the father of peace studies. This includes positive action, interaction, institutions, and structure that create a culture of sustained peaceful societies. Such as restoration of relationships and conflict resolution the conflict in a constructive way. Likewise, here, we can see a potent example of the Indus Water Treaty of 1960 between the nuclear rivals of India and Pakistan where characteristics of a positive peace successfully implemented like international negotiation, mediation, and cooperative framework, the potential of peaceful coexistence despite the fiction and turbulence in relationships. The treaty was mediated by the World Bank that has led to a significant example of cooperation than conflict. Indeed, an endeavor to achieve 'Positive Peace' between two countries by establishing a mechanism for cooperation regarding their use of the rivers. Accordingly, the treaty allocated the use of the eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas and Sutlej) to India and the use of the western rivers (Chenab, Jhelum and Indus) to Pakistan. Hence, water diplomacy has the long-term objective of stability and peace in a region as a catalyst for peace.

CONCLUSION

In essence, it is a fact that shared waters is critical for the future of the region. Moreover, the hydro politics between transboundary river basins is gradually becoming a perpetual source of inter-state conflicts. Thus, South Asia countries should develop a framework to manage their transboundary waters partnership programme. It can be a tools to strengthen transboundary water cooperation. However, water governance will likely depend mainly on the decisions of the policy framework in the subcontinent. Yet, there is an incredible scope of regional cooperation and collaboration over shared freshwater resources which induced huge potential as a bridge to build regional peace and stability. It can serve as a driver of mutual benefit for all riparian states dependent on these water resources. In addition, water diplomacy can contribute to solving different tendencies of intractable regional disputes triggered by external situations like cross-border terrorism, fundamentalism, illegal migration, and territorial issues.

¹<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=8S>

² <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/7715>

³ <https://www.nasa.gov/jpl/grace/study-third-of-big-groundwater-basins-in-distress>

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