



CHINA PROGRESSES WITH DAM PROJECTS: SHOULD INDIA WORRY?

Simrat Virk
Research Associate, CAPS

China recently announced it has completed a section of a major 510 MW hydropower project in the middle reaches of the Brahmaputra- called the Zangmu Dam, in the Tibetan Autonomous Region.ⁱ The dam which is 3,300 meters above sea level became partially operational in November this year. The main purpose of the dam, as Beijing explains is, “harnessing the rich water resources of the Yarlung Zangbo River to empower the development of the electricity -strapped region.”ⁱⁱ However, what raises India’s fears is the fact that the five other sections of the dam are due for completion next year, which many experts believe, could result in a sharp drop in the water levels entering the North-Eastern region. Further, there are concerns that China could divert the waters of the River to the arid northern part, similar to what it has done in the south.

The Zangbo Dam is just one of the three major hydropower dams proposed under China’s 12th Five-year plan (2011-2015) to be built on the Brahmaputra (in the Tibetan part). On completion, the four-year, US\$ 150 billion project is expected to generate 2.5 billion kilowatt hours of electricity in a year.ⁱⁱⁱ Although China has repeatedly assured India that projects such as these are primarily run-of-the-river (RoR), not affecting the flow of water, yet, the fact that China shares information, limited primarily to hydrological data during the monsoon months, ought to be of concern to India. Further, it is important to note that China is yet to sign a water sharing agreement with the lower riparian states. Although India and China have joint working mechanisms that regularly exchange data on the flow, yet efforts towards a formal agreement have so far been lacking.

Although the Government of China has stated that, “any new projects have to go through scientific planning and study, with the consideration of the interests of both upper and lower stream (riparian) countries”,^{iv} yet it is difficult to ignore the fact that in the past many of China’s neighbours have voiced concerns over China’s dam construction projects. For example, the waters of the Mekong River that originates in the Tibetan Plateau and runs through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia, is primarily used up by China, leaving almost nothing for the downstream countries. It is only recently that China has begun sharing information with other countries. However, this is primarily limited to sharing hydrological data.

Besides a drop in water levels, there is also the added fear of floods. This was seen in 2001 with Arunanchal Pradesh witnessing its worst ever floods. This was primarily a result of a dam breach on the river. The fact that China plans to construct more such mega dams, has only reinforced India’s fears. Whether these dams are really RoR type, as China claims, is also a matter of concern. This has already resulted in anti-dam protestors wanting to take the matter up with the Indian government and threatening to ‘lay siege’ at the Chinese embassy in New Delhi.^v

With a general consensus that the Tibetan Plateau (where China has struggled for decades to assert its control) is an integral part of China, gives it an upper hand, particularly when it comes to water control. Further, the Tibetan Plateau with an average altitude of 4500 meters, and being a source of many of Asia’s biggest rivers, provides China water supremacy. In fact, it is often referred to as being the *Third Pole* as it has the largest repository of fresh water after the two poles.

Another factor that affects India’s chances of having a say is that, under international law a country that is already putting its natural resources (that it shares with other countries) into use, has more rights over them comparatively. Having begun work on the River gives China advantage over both India and Bangladesh.^{vi}

The Indian government faces tremendous criticism from water experts for not taking a tough stand on the issue. As Brahma Chellaney puts it, the government does not “attach water the strategic seriousness it deserves.”^{vii} On the other hand is China, which pursues a *Doctrine of Absolute Territorial Integrity* over river waters, which allows it to have absolute control over waters that originate in its territories.

Water, undoubtedly will be the next big issue between India and China. With China already undertaking mega projects on the Brahmaputra, India must carefully explore options to safeguard its interests- which can potentially be done if it engages China into (some sort of) a water sharing agreement. Further, India must, in clear terms, seek complete clarity on the data that China shares, as many believe that currently, the only source of reliable data in water sharing comes from the United Nations. It will certainly be in India's interests if it begins to effectively use its existing water resources, as well as look for and tap other sources of energy.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS))

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ⁱ The Brahmaputra River is known as the Yarlung Zangbo in China. With an average altitude of 4500 metres, it is the highest river in the world.

ⁱⁱ Saibal Dasgupta, "China builds hydroelectric dam on Brahmaputra in Tibet, India fears flash floods", *The Times of India*, 24 November, 2014 at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/China-builds-hydroelectric-dam-on-Brahmaputra-in-Tibet-India-fears-flash-floods/articleshow/45252816.cms>, accessed on 27 November, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yang Yi, Major Hydro plant goes Operational in Power thirsty Tibet, *Xinhua News*, 23 November, 2014 at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-11/23/c_133808253.htm, accessed on 26 November, 2014.

^{iv} Saibal Dasgupta, "After keeping India in the dark on dam, China promises no harm", *The Times of India*, 5 February, 2013 at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/After-keeping-India-in-dark-on-dam-China-promises-no-harm/articleshow/18342898.cms>, accessed on 30 November, 2014.

^v Rahul Karmakar, Assam Protest China Dam on Upper Brahmaputra, *Hindustan Times*, 25 November, 2014 at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/assam-protests-china-dam-on-upper-brahmaputra/article1-1289906.aspx>, accessed on 5 December, 2014.

^{vi} Chapter 2, Article 4 of the Helsinki Rules on the uses of Waters of International Rivers states, "Each basin State is entitled, within its territory, to a reasonable and equitable share in the beneficial uses of the waters of an international drainage basin". In determining what a reasonable share is, Article 5 (2) states, "The past utilization of the waters of the basin, including in particular existing utilization".

^{vii} RN Bhaskar, "Is India Losing the Water War Against China", *DNA*, 27 April, 2014 at <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-is-india-losing-the-water-war-against-china-1982524>, accessed on 1 December 2014.