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China-India Water Disputes: Two Major Misperceptions Revisited

By Zhang Hongzhou

Synopsis

The Sino-India 'water wars' narrative has been overblown and there is a need for a better understanding of China's intent.

Commentary

FOR YEARS, Indian security analysts, most notably Dr. Brahma Chellaney, have been warning of the coming water wars between India and China. While water issues could emerge as a major threat to Sino-India relations given rapidly rising demand, competing water usages and threats from climate change, the 'water wars' narrative has been overblown.

Furthermore, to address growing water challenges and manage the potential water disputes between two countries, there is an urgent need for a better understanding of China's intent and Sino-Indian disputes need to be re-examined in terms of two misperceptions: the Grand Western Water Diversion Plan and China as an uncooperative water hegemon.

The Grand Western Water Diversion Plan

The Grand Western Water Diversion plan is a radical water diversion project proposed by the Chinese water expert-Guo Kai. It intends to divert water from the upstream sections of six rivers in southwestern China, including the Brahmaputra River – which flows into India - to the dry areas of northern China. It is believed that if the water is diverted, the water levels of the Brahmaputra will drop significantly, affecting millions in India's Northeastern region.

At first glance, it seems that India's fear is reasonable. Given China's acute water shortage problem, China could be motivated to divert waters from transboundary waters. Next, based on China's track record, mega water projects such as the Three Gorges Dam and the South-North Water Diversion project seem to be the Chinese approach to address its domestic water problems. However, it is a serious mistake to believe that the Chinese government would implement the plan given the following reasons:

Firstly, despite the fact that China is a one-party state, competing interests prevail among different social groups and even between different government entities; hence the opinion of a few scholars and even retired officials cannot represent the policy preference of the government. Apart from strong criticism from the mainstream scholarly community, on several occasions, the Chinese government has clearly stated that China has no plans to divert water from the Brahmaputra River to the Yellow River. In addition, China claimed that it would not do anything that would harm the interests of the lower riparian states including India.

Secondly, many outsiders wrongly perceive the Grand Western Water Diversion Plan as the western line of China's South-North water diversion Project which intends to link the headwaters of the Yangtze and Yellow rivers across the high-altitude Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. While both the eastern line and central line of the South-North Diversion project were completed, the western line remains largely conceptual. Considering its grand scale and potential ecological, social and environmental impacts many experts feel that the western line may ultimately prove impossible to build.

Thirdly, Chinese scholars and even government officials have become more aware of the futility of water diversion projects to meet China's water shortages. As stated by China's former minister of water resource, Wang Shucheng, solutions lie in the development of a water-sustaining society; water diversion projects are not only costly but also aggravate current ecological and relocation problems. Furthermore, with declining costs of water recycling and desalination technologies, the western route could turn out to be economically unattractive, not to mention the massive Grand Western Water Diversion Plan.

Lastly, given the potential negative impact of the Grand Western Water Diversion Plan on China's relations with its lower riparian neighbours, particularly India, it is even more unlikely that the Chinese government will seriously consider the Grand Western Water Diversion Plan. This is especially the case under Chinese President Xi Jinping's New Foreign Policy Doctrine of bringing amity, security and common prosperity to its neighbourhood.

China as an uncooperative water hegemon

The other misperception of the Sino-India water dispute is China's uncooperative attitude towards transboundary rivers issues, arguably reflected in China's passive role in international water governance and its reluctance to cooperate with downstream countries. Indeed, China's engagement with the global water governance regime is very limited. China voted against the adoption of the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention (UNWC) and it is unlikely that China will sign up for the convention in the near future.

Besides, at the regional level, China also appears to be quite uncooperative in terms of transboundary river management. For years, China has been criticised for being absent from the Mekong River Commission and turning down binding water agreements with India.

Although it is true that China needs to cooperate more with neighbouring countries on the transboundary river issues, it is unfair to label China as the uncooperative water hegemon. Firstly, for many years, data and information related to water, land and other critical resources which have been considered state secrets, have not been made open even to the domestic audience, not to mention foreign countries.

Nonetheless, what should be noted is that these areas are gradually opening up. China has become more willing and open to share hydrological data with neighbouring countries including India.

Precondition for closer relations

Secondly, China's vote against UNWC is not without its reasons: (a) 1997 UNWC's emphasis on responsibility at the expense of the interests of upper riparian states; (b) conflict between mandatory involvement of third party in dispute settlement and China's long tradition on bilateral approach to dispute settlement; (c) national sovereignty and national security concerns.

Thirdly, contrary to common belief, China is party to some 50 treaties governing or related to its shared water resources, though most of the treaties are not water sharing agreements. Fourthly,

according to Professor Patricia Wouters, a study which compares China's transboundary water treaty practices with approaches adopted under the UNWC shows that China in fact embraces the fundamental cornerstone principles of UNWC —the overarching duty to cooperate, the norms of equal and reasonable use and due diligence obligation not to cause significant transboundary harms—despite the treaties' vague content.

Besides, China's aversion to a UNWC's third party compulsory dispute settlement is linked to culture and tradition. However, what is clear is that both UNWC and fundamental principles of Chinese foreign policy—Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence—stress peaceful resolution of international disputes.

If history can serve as a guide, based on China approaches to transboundary water disputes management with Russia and Kazakhstan, a warming bilateral relationship is the precondition to closer cooperation on the water issues between China and India.

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