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Power Asymmetry in the China-India Brahmaputra River Dispute

BY SELINA HO

China and India are upper and middle riparians, respectively, of the Brahmaputra River. There are, however, few robust mechanisms for riparian cooperation between them — there are no water sharing agreements, joint river commissions, or dispute settlement mechanisms. Existing mechanisms consist mostly of a series of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) on hydrological data sharing and a body of technical experts. These MOUs are, however, non-binding and there is no oversight body that can ensure implementation.

The difficulties in managing the Brahmaputra, and the fact that both China and India suffer from water scarcity, have led to predictions that the two countries will fight over water in the future. Despite these predictions, armed conflict in the Brahmaputra is unlikely in the current context. Why are China and India unable to establish robust mechanisms for cooperation on the Brahmaputra River, and how, with little institutionalized cooperation in the Brahmaputra, have both sides managed to keep their riparian relations from creating open conflicts?

The power asymmetry between China and India provides answers to both questions. China is in a stronger position than India economically and militarily. By the end of 2013, China's GDP (PPP) had expanded to nearly four times that of India. The military gap has also widened considerably. In 2015, China's defense spending was US \$145.8 million compared to India's modest US \$47.9 million.

The power disparity between the two countries has led to differences in perceptions and focus. China, as the more powerful of the pair, does not perceive India as a serious threat, and does not pay as much attention to India as India does to China. China regards India as a regional power without global reach, while seeing itself as a global power. Moreover, its success in the 1962 Border War fostered a sense of superiority on China's part. India's threat perception of China, by contrast, has been colored since by its humiliating defeat. As a result of these perceptions, China does not pay as much attention to India as India does to China. While China figures prominently in India's defense reports, there is barely any mention of India in China's defense white papers. In recent years, India's threat perception has shifted from Pakistan to China as its number one threat. India, because of its insecurities, suffers from over-attention to China, a result of which is the tendency to view every Chinese action, including on the Brahmaputra, as sinister and conspiratorial.

These differences in perceptions explain the lack of institutionalized cooperation between China and India in managing the Brahmaputra. Because the current state of Sino-Indian relations is satisfactory for China, its strategy is focused on maintaining the status quo so that it can focus attention on more pressing issues, particularly on its maritime borders.

Selina Ho, Senior Research Fellow at the National University of Singapore, explains that “Because the current state of Sino-Indian relations is satisfactory for China, its strategy is focused on maintaining the status quo.”

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“The current state of affairs should not be taken for granted. Changes in economic and physical conditions in the Brahmaputra River Basin could produce new circumstances and lead to increased conflict.”

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China thus aims to keep relations with India on an even keel and will do the minimum to ensure that trouble with India does not erupt. However, such an attitude and lack of attention on China’s part means that China has little incentive to increase cooperation on the Brahmaputra. It is the upstream riparian and as long as there is no severe downturn in riparian relations with India, it sees little need to extend cooperation with India on managing the river.

Despite the lack of cooperative mechanisms, however, armed conflict has not broken out over the Brahmaputra River and is unlikely to break out in the future. This is because states of unequal power often manage the unequal nature of their relationships by minimizing potentially hot issues and controlling the escalation of misperceptions. These management techniques constrain negative perceptions, and explain why, despite existing problems, armed conflict is unlikely in the long run.

Both China and India have engaged in strategies to prevent problems from escalating, including the use of inclusive rhetoric. Chinese leaders have stressed the narrative of two great civilizations working together to champion the interests of the Third World. Chinese rhetoric and actions with respect to the Brahmaputra have tended towards “desecuritizing” water conflicts so as to assuage Indian concerns. Chinese officials have referred to China’s dams on the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra as “run-of-the-river.” By agreeing to share hydrological data, China aims to address Indian concerns about the floods in northeast India. It has also reassured India time and again that it has no intentions of diverting water from the Brahmaputra. The Indian government has also tended to employ rhetoric that prevents an escalation of tensions with China over water issues, while simultaneously raising trans-border rivers as an issue of concern to Chinese leaders. Indian government leaders have avoided inflammatory remarks and sought to calm incendiary language from other politicians and the media. They have received repeated assurances from top Chinese leaders that Beijing has no intention of diverting the waters of the Brahmaputra and that the Chinese would not do anything that would adversely impact India’s interests.

Both sides have also sought to routinize water issues. Even though there is limited institutional cooperation between China and India in managing the Brahmaputra, the existing MOUs and expert-level mechanisms provide useful channels of communication that help routinize their interactions and prevent open conflict from resulting. The annual meetings of the expert group since 2007 and the exchange of information provide focal points for discussion and promote better understanding between the two sides.

The actions of both the Chinese and Indian governments have helped prevent the escalation of conflict on the Brahmaputra River, lowering the likelihood of armed conflict in the future. However, the current state of affairs should not be taken for granted. Changes in economic and physical conditions in the Brahmaputra River Basin could produce new circumstances and lead to increased conflict or even war. It is therefore imperative that both sides step up engagement with each other in areas such as disaster management, climate change research, and environmental protection. Such engagement puts their bilateral riparian relations on a firmer footing and allows both sides to deal with changes in physical and environmental conditions that could affect the Brahmaputra River Basin.

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