

Weaponisation of Water in South and South-East Asia

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In his classic work "Prisoners of Geography," Tim Marshall argues how geography moulds as well as restricts the decision-making process for global leaders. The same is true for South and South East Asia, where China effectively controls the world's greatest freshwater reserves, attributable to its control over the Tibetan Plateau, the source of the majority of transboundary rivers in this region. Mighty rivers such as Mekong, Brahmaputra have been tamed through active dam building which has resulted not only into geopolitical risks for lower riparian states but have adverse impact on ecosystem sustained by these rivers. China considers these resources as sovereign right rather than shared resource which eventually became a rationale for China to evade the purview of principle of Public International Law such as in case of Mekong River Commission where China hasn't officially joined as partner thus repudiating its stand on Mekong river (Lancang river in China) as a sovereign right. However, in regard to South Asian context where India as one of the biggest players is more of a rival than states that falls into its sphere of influence, we need to explore these huge water reserves as a potential threat against India.

In November of 2003, a query was initiated through Ministry of External Affairs at the request of Ministry of Water Resources to Chinese counterpart to inquire about their plan to divert rivers originating from Tibet to northward in China. Then in August of 2004, there emerged reports of lake formation with an area of around 200 hectares and depth of 40 meters at one of the tributaries of Sutlej river i.e. Pare chu river. The sudden formation of lake which endangers some very strategic points near Indo-China border raised suspicions whether it was a deliberate action as construction on the banks of Pare chu and other rivers in Tibet was confirmed through satellite imagery. In 2005, an 800 Crore loss was incurred in Himachal Pradesh which swept away strategic Indo-Tibetan road along with its various bridges and ropeways. A study into the same concluded that Tso Morari lake in Tibet was main culprit behind 1060 Million Cubic Meter run away water out of which Pare Chu lake could have contributed to maximum of 155 MCM run away water but yet many experts question the strategic defense location which is endangered by this lake. It was also widely speculated that this phenomenon could also repeat in Brahmaputra river's case where its water could be diverted to water scarce Northern China where 45 % of population has only access to 13.8 % of the water . The perception that it was a deliberate move by China finds resonance according to many experts, India's request to send a team of experts was turned down . China is yet to sign and rectify Convention on Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Environment Modification Technique (ENMOD) is a clear stance towards China's insistence to view these water sources as sovereign control.

According to Food and Agriculture Organization Data, South and South East Asian states rely heavily on water of transboundary rivers which originates from Tibet which includes India (33.4%), Bangladesh (91.3% Including Ganga, an Indian originated river), Laos (42.9%), Thailand (47.1%), Cambodia (74.7%) and Vietnam (58.9%). China through construction of dams in territories of India i.e. Pakistan Occupied Kashmir has risen the stakes which will have a

serious impact on lower riparian Indian States through geopolitical as well as agricultural risk. The silt formation will devoid northern plains of India of its rich nutrients thus exacting a heavy ecological cost. The fact that China has control over Aksai Chin post 1962 war which is integral to its CPEC project under Belt and Road Initiative are factors which point out to the fact that China if given the situation will not forgo water management to pressurize India in future. The situation is similar for other lower riparian states of the region. This situation poses a severe threat in contemporary circumstances where the concept of "Water wars" is gaining interest as the stakes for parties involved is very high. It calls for an International framework where such potential risks are taken care of while there is a paradigm shift from anthropocentric ways of exploitation to methods which ensures ecological equilibrium. CNF
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