

Darkening Waters, Gathering Storm: Sino-Indian Water War on the Brahmaputra River

Written by Austin Wu and Andrew Latham

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AUSTIN WU AND ANDREW LATHAM, MAR 29 2023

As the world faces the growing threat of water scarcity, policymakers and scholars are growing increasingly concerned about the potential for water-related conflicts to emerge. While water scarcity has long been an issue in some parts of the world, the problem is becoming more widespread and severe, with two-thirds of the global population currently facing severe water scarcity for at least one month a year. And as the problem grows more acute, the prospect that water scarcity will drive political instability, mass migration, and even geopolitical conflict also becomes more acute. Indeed, water scarcity is rapidly becoming such a crucial political issue in some parts of the world that it is raising the ominous prospect of “water wars” between nations.

Perhaps no two states exemplify this emerging trend as much as China and India. These two countries together comprise over 35% of the global population, but collectively they contain only 11% of the world’s freshwater. This mismatch is further exacerbated by high rates of water pollution and the increasing demands of industrializing economies. Beijing’s population was capped at 23 million due to water overdraw, while Chennai, India’s 7th largest city, recently suffered a “Day Zero,” completely running out of groundwater for several weeks in 2017. Conflict on the Sino-Indian border is not a new phenomenon, but the growing water crisis has the potential to push both states to the brink of war.

Amidst simmering tensions between China and India, the Brahmaputra River – also known as the Yarlung Tsangpo in China – has emerged as a key flashpoint in the growing crisis. The river, one of the world’s largest by volume, runs from Tibet to Northeastern India and is a vital source of hydrological and power generation resources. China’s construction of a mega-dam in the “Great Bend” of the Brahmaputra, touted to generate 60-Gigawatt of energy annually, has raised alarm bells in New Delhi.

The 14th Five-Year Plan specifically targets the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo for further damming projects, and Chinese engineers and officials have even proposed linking the upper reaches of the river to the wider South-North Water Diversion Project. Indian policymakers and experts have expressed concerns that these projects could diminish the flow of the river in India, which contains 40% of the river’s hydropower capacity and provides water for Assam and its thriving tea industry – the largest in the world.

2012 and early 2022, when the Brahmaputra’s water levels dropped, local Indian officials were quick to blame the Chinese dams, exacerbating the already strained relationship between the two countries. Moreover, Beijing’s track record of artificially restricting the flow of the Mekong River to downstream nations has further fueled suspicions in India. As China’s upstream activities in the Brahmaputra River continue to raise tensions, it remains to be seen how New Delhi and Beijing will navigate this complex issue.

However, without a water-sharing agreement, New Delhi has no legal recourse to any of Beijing’s actions. The already limited flow data that China currently sells India was temporarily cancelled after border showdowns in 2017. Any cooperation between the two states on this issue has been fleeting and minimal. The well has been further poisoned by intransigence on the part of both Xi and Modi. As the downstream power, India is quickly running out of ways to change the status quo without resorting to violence.

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Wars have only rarely been fought over water alone, of course. As Jin H. Pak has noted, water shortages must be accompanied by “upstream-downstream positioning, sovereignty linkages, and political instability” in order to lead to armed conflict. Ominously, however, all three of these factors are already present on the Brahmaputra. As previously discussed, the river’s flow from China to India creates a highly asymmetrical power dynamic between China and India. In fact, it is this power imbalance which is at the root of most Sino-Indian water usage disputes.

Second, the Brahmaputra also runs through the contested Arunachal Pradesh, which has been a site of consistent Sino-Indian conflict for over 60 years. Since the 1962 war, border skirmishes between Chinese and Indian troops have been a fact of life, with the 2022 Tawang flare-up being the latest in a long line of crises. Of course, this region is intimately connected to the PRC’s occupation of Tibet, which was opposed by India. Jawaharlal Nehru’s bold move to host the Dalai Lama in India stirred up a hornet’s nest in China, sparking significant consternation that remains a significant point of contention between the two powers. Additionally, the construction of dams and other infrastructure projects along the river has emerged as a new arena for Beijing and New Delhi to establish their claims over the disputed region of Arunachal Pradesh.

Finally, both China and India are faced with difficult domestic transitions that will complicate the geopolitics of water. Amid mounting internal challenges, political instability is an ever-present threat for both China and India. For China, a slowing economy coupled with a declining population has created a challenging environment for the Communist Party of China (CCP) to maintain its political legitimacy. The COVID-19 pandemic has only served to exacerbate the party’s deficiencies, laying bare its incompetence and prompting President Xi Jinping to adopt a more assertive foreign policy stance while leveraging the burgeoning nationalist sentiment.

India, once celebrated as a model of pluralistic democracy, has undergone a shift under Prime Minister Narendra Modi towards Hindu nationalism. This shift has resulted in the persecution of the country’s 200 million Muslims, with widespread violence and social unrest being the unfortunate byproducts. Moreover, recent polls suggest that Indian nationalism, coupled with fears of China, has led to a more confrontational stance towards Beijing. Modi’s government must contend with rampant corruption and economic inequality, which have only heightened social tensions and added to the volatility of India’s internal landscape. As Modi continues to lead India down a path of ethnonationalism, his government must confront the dangers posed by these pressing internal challenges.

And if this weren’t cause enough for concern, there are other factors pushing in the direction of water war. Demand for water, for example, continues to rise in both China and India. This will incentivize China to further exploit the Brahmaputra, perhaps linking it into wider water redirection efforts. At the same time, growing water demand downstream will make Chinese projects even more politically salient in India. If this is followed by an acute water shortage (like in Chennai) or an extended drought, New Delhi could be under significant domestic pressure to alleviate such a crisis. Growing Hindu nationalism might combine with fear of Chinese upstream activities to form an explosive domestic cocktail. Because of Modi’s democratization of the foreign policy process, a public call to action could exert very strong pressure on New Delhi to act against the PRC.

Additionally, the gap in overall power between China and India is closing. While China’s military remains superior to India’s (and India’s military development has lagged its overall economic development), a closing power gap will likely increase India’s aggressiveness and tolerance for risk. A significant closing of the current military discrepancy, let alone one-to-one parity with the PRC, remains only a distant possibility. However, India could be confronted with temporary circumstances of Chinese weakness that would create openings for action.

For the moment at least, this correlation of political and geopolitical forces is still not sufficient to provoke war. Simply put, China is far more satisfied with its position on the Brahmaputra and is significantly stronger than India both economically and militarily. Furthermore, because the PRC is locked in competition with the more powerful United States, it has little incentive to be drawn into a conflict with what it sees as a secondary priority. India, on the other hand, is aware of China’s superior capabilities and knows that it does not have the strength to win what would likely be a two-front war against China and Pakistan simultaneously. As such, if the status quo remains relatively stable, the risk of a water war breaking out on the Brahmaputra will remain minimal.

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Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that this stability will be long-lasting. All three trends noted above are not only accelerating, but doing so in a manner that is mutually reinforcing. As India's wealth, power and water demand continue to rise, it will inevitably become more aggressive in responding to China's hydrological projects. This dynamic will only amplify tensions between the two nations and could quickly escalate into conflict if left unaddressed. Moreover, the regional and global balance of power is shifting toward India, increasing the likelihood of war. Pakistan, a close ally of China, is in a state of political and economic turmoil. Its inability to repay Chinese loans, government dysfunction, and terrorist attacks against China have weakened the "all-weather" relationship between the two states. If Pakistan's partnership with China erodes further or its military capability becomes less effective, it will remove one of the most significant deterrents to Indian aggression.

China's growing assertiveness across Asia is also working in India's favor. Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, China has adopted an increasingly aggressive foreign policy, alienating previously hedging countries and even some of its partners. China's naval activities in the South and East China Sea, as well as its damming activities on the Mekong, have provided India with valuable opportunities to form a potential anti-Chinese coalition across Southeast Asia. Additionally, if China were to become involved in a conflict with one of its other neighbors, or even with the US over Taiwan, it would create further openings that New Delhi might wish to exploit. These trends could accelerate the closing of the Sino-Indian power gap and make the possibility of a water war even more likely.

The prospect of a conflict in the Brahmaputra basin is concerning not only because of the grave consequences for the region but also for the global economy and the balance of power in Asia. It could lead to unimaginable human suffering and further environmental degradation in the region. Unfortunately, both bilateral and regional trends point towards a rising likelihood of such a war. If such a conflict indeed comes to pass, it may represent the beginning of a new, even more devastating form of resource conflict.

It is crucial that policymakers in both New Delhi and Beijing recognize the gravity of the situation and take immediate steps to defuse tensions before it is too late. The stability of the region and the future of Sino-Indian relations depend on it.

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