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## Sinister Chinese propositions

Reports about China's plans to divert the Brahmaputra and eventually connect it with the Yangtze have been met with considerable alarm in the Northeast.



Water has become a valuable public good and needs to be conserved. With climate change, induced by global warming, as a result of rampant deforestation and environmental pollution, and accentuated by a break-neck pace of industrialization, inter-state water conflicts have become commonplace. Recent reports of the Chinese plans for the development of three new dams at liexu, Jiacha and Dagu just north of Arunachal Pradesh have caught everyone by surprise. This proposal was approved as a part of China's 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2011-2015), in January 2013, by the State Council or Cabinet. It comes in addition to the 510 megawatt (mw) Zangmu dam which has been under construction since 2008. China terms all these projects as run-of-the-river type, which means that these dams would have limited or little water storage facilities and are dependent mainly on seasonal water flows. But the secrecy with which it has been moving ahead with these projects has left others anxious in India's Northeast and Bangladesh.

Let us begin with an overview of China's water scarcity in its northern and central provinces. It is home to seven of the world's most polluted rivers. The growth of mega cities in the north of China has drained the underground aquifers to dangerous proportions. Elizabeth C Economy states (The Diplomat, January 22, 2013) that there are 10,000 petrochemical plants along the Yangtze and 4,000 along the Huang He

rivers, which makes their waters too toxic. This causes 60,000 premature human deaths annually. Sadly enough, the average Chinese citizen has little idea whether the water one drinks is potable or not!

The South-to-North Water Diversion project (refer [www/water-technology.net](http://www/water-technology.net)) was first mooted by Mao Zedong in 1952 to ease water shortages in Beijing, Tianjin and the northern provinces of Hebei, Henan and Shandong. On August 23, 2002, after much deliberation and research, China's state council approved this project worth \$62 billion to eventually connect the Huang He, Huai He, Hai He and the Yangtze rivers through three corridors (eastern, central and western). But critics point out this would not solve the water woes; instead, it would cause serious ecological problems, even desertification, in the lower riparian areas.

Tibet is often referred to as the 'third pole' for its pristine environment. It is home to some of the major river systems of Asia, such as the Nu-Salween, Yarlung Zangbo-Brahmaputra, Lancang-Mekong, Yangtze, Huang He etc. Originating in the Himalayas, in the Angsi glacier near the sapphire-blue Manasarovar lake (Tibetan: Mapham Yumtso i.e. Victorious Lake) in Tibet, the 1800 mile long Brahmaputra river takes a sharp bend, near Motuo (China), to enter India at Bone, a small hamlet near gelling in Arunachal Pradesh. This bend, between the two Himalayan peaks, Namche Barwa (7,756 metres), creates one of the world's deepest gorges through which the river drops nearly 2,00 metres as it enters India.

This fall near Motuo (850 metres) has been identified by Chinese authorities as conducive to build a 38,000 mw hydropower station. Some analysts say that this capacity is equivalent to all the oil and gas reserves in the South China Sea! This comes in tune with China's plans to increase its total power capacity from 10,60,000 mw in 2011 to 15,00,000 mw by 2020 in a bid to reduce dependence on fossil fuels (David Stanway, [www.internationalrivers.org](http://www.internationalrivers.org), November 19, 2012). China announced at the 2009 Copenhagen Summit on climate change that it would reduce its carbon emissions by at least 40 per cent in the same period of time.

The Brahmaputra is the file-line of the socio-economic, cultural and religious milieu of Northeast India and Bangladesh. The Brahmaputra basin accounts for 57 percent of India's total hydropower reserves. Reports about China's plans to divert this river and eventually connect it with the Yangtze have been met with considerable alarm in the region. India and Bangladesh, being lower riparian countries, have much to lose from such a diversion. The dry months of March and April could see the river reduced almost to a stream. It would also accentuate the silting problem, thereby raising the riverbed.

This region's high seismicity (Zone 5) is a legacy of the Indian tectonic plate ramming against the Eurasian plate millions of years ago which resulted in the emergence of the Himalayas (the youngest fold mountain range of the world). Any major dam holding a huge amount of water could cause a disaster downstream in the event of an earthquake. Sadiya and Dibrugarh are sad reminders of the 1950 earth-quake. The 760 mw Zipingpu dam in the Min river is supposed to have caused, analysts say, the 7.9 Richter scale earthquake in Sichuan on May 12, 2008, killing 69,197 people and rendering 4.8 million people homeless.

In 2002, China and India signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for the provision of hydrological data on the Brahmaputra during floods from China to India. This MoU expired in 2007 and was replaced with a new one valid for five years, which was signed on June 5, 2008. Chinese officials have categorically denied any plans to divert the river to the north and emphasized that the current projects have dealt with only one percent of the Yarlung Zangbo's total hydro-potential (Ananth Krishnan, the Hindu, March 2, 2012). The joint communiqué between Prime Minister Manmohan Sing and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, during the latter's India visit in December 2010, reiterated the promotion and enhancement of co-operation on the sharing of flood season hydrological data and assistance in emergency management to be provided by the Chinese side.

However, given the veil of secrecy maintained by either party on this issue, it gets very difficult for the common people of Northeast India to sift the grain from the chaff. As mentioned above, the building of three new dams announced last month by China's state council caught everyone by surprise. Beyond saying that the Chinese government takes a responsible attitude in developing its cross-border water resources, China's foreign ministry has not been too forthcoming in its purported plans. While the government of India is trying to dispel fears about China's intentions to the general public, it is quietly trying to assert its own claim over the Brahmaputra. It has planned the setting up of a huge network of 168 dams to generate 63,000 mw of power in Arunachal Pradesh. The Government of India has stated that it is imperative for India to establish these dams in order to assert its right over the Brahmaputra. Moreover, it must try to engage China to draw up a water-sharing settlement on the lines of the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty that it had signed with Pakistan.

Whether it is China's river diversion plans alone or both India and China's dam-building projects put together, it must be seen that the local people do not suffer. China should make concerted efforts to clean up its rivers first. Asymmetrical power relations, together with being the upper riparian country, may put China in the advantageous position. However, any potential conflict in the future would be detrimental for both China and India. Both are nuclear powers and are the leaders of global economic growth.

This sub-region is also home to a fragile but valuable ecosystem, and home to a lot of ethnic minorities. Therefore, it is prudent not to fight over this scarce resource.

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