

Dam Diplomacy of China

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Context- China is constructing a new dam on the Mabja Zangbo river in Tibet, close to the tri-junction which is a topic of concern for both India and Nepal.

Key Highlights

- The new dam is located around 16 km north of the tri-junction and it is opposite the Kalapani area of Uttarakhand.
- The Mabja Zangbo river originates in Nagari county of Tibet and it flows through Nepal into the Ghaghara River before joining the Ganga in India.
- China's upstream actions such as dams (on Brahmaputra, Indus, tributaries of the Ganga), diversion of water, hydropolitics, and power asymmetry poses a security threat to India and water scarcity downstream.
- There is no such legally binding international treaty on water sharing between India and China.
- Under CPEC, China plans to build two mega-dams on the Indus, known as Bunji Dam and Bhasha Dam.
- In 2021, China announced that it would construct a massive dam on the lower reaches of Yarlung Zangbo which is also known as Brahmaputra in order to generate up to 70 GW of power, three times that of the country's Three Gorges dam, which is the world's largest hydropower plant in terms of installed capacity.

Hydropolitics

- It is a water-hegemon, which aims to consolidate control, uses different strategies,

tactics, and power resources to achieve this control. When consolidated control is achieved, the water hegemony will have power over the whole basin.

- Riparian relations are shaped and developed by certain interpretations of the use of river water. Upper riparian nations essentially base their claims on 'absolute territorial sovereignty' which is, the right to use rivers unilaterally, regardless of lower riparian concerns.
- The lower riparian claim the 'absolute territorial integrity' of rivers, stressing that upper riparian actions should not affect the water flowing downstream.

Impact of Building Dams on India

- It is used as a tool in Hydropolitics: China is a critical player in the hydro-politics of the region.
- Its hydrological position is one of complete upper riparian supremacy giving it enormous latitude in shaping huge political equations with its riparian neighbours.
- India is an upper, middle, as well as lower riparian. India's middle riparian position increases its dependency (water insecurity) on the headwaters of the rivers such as the Indus, Sutlej, and Brahmaputra that originate in the Tibetan plateau.
- China wants to maintain continuous pressure on India be it all along the Himalayan range or the Indian Ocean region through building dams along the border areas.
- **India and its Neighbourhood:**
 - China was one of the three nations that did not approve of the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Waterways.
 - China has built in total eleven mega-dams on the Mekong River, causing water levels there to fluctuate widely without prior notice in Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam.
- **Impact on earlier signed Treaty:**
 - Treaties have been signed to provide a definite amount of water to lower riparian states like the 1960 Indus Water Treaty with Pakistan and the 1996 Ganga Treaty with Bangladesh.
- **Military threat to India from Border Infrastructure:**
 - China's rapid build-up of infrastructure along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India is alarming and it adds to overall destabilising and corrosive behaviour along the entire India-China border.
 - The satellite images of the dam on Mabja Zangbo river shows the formation of an embankment type dam with a reservoir which leads to a possibility of military establishment by China near the tri-junction already witnessed from Yarlung Zangbo dam.
 - From the multiple intrusions into Indian territory in eastern Ladakh, China has assiduously built and consolidated its military positions and border infrastructure along LAC as well upgraded its air bases facing India. For example, China is constructing a bridge across Pangong Tso in Khurnak Fort Area.
- **Impact on people lives Downstream:**
 - China projects alongside Brahmaputra will impact lower riparian states local economy and ecology because of future plans of water diversion and dam projects.

- China's construction of hydroelectricity dams in ecologically and seismically active regions shows reassertion of its aggressive 'supply-side hydraulic' approach of increasing storage capacity by building dams and reservoirs.
- These steps can also impact food and water security needs of people living in low riparian regions as well increase disaster risk.
- **Water Resources of North-East:**
 - Even running of the river hydroelectric dams can reduce water flow downstream, particularly during the dry season.
 - India is worried about the release of water during the monsoons, when north-eastern states such as Assam experience food shortage.
 - Several species of flora and fauna are endemic to the North-East part of India and some of them are critically endangered. The ecosystem in the Himalayan region is already on the declining stage.
- **Seismological Impact:**
 - The Himalayan region is more vulnerable to earthquakes and other seismic activities. The sheer size of the infrastructure projects undertaken there poses a significant threat to the populations living downstream.
 - China is building hydrological projects along geographical fault lines. For example, projects on the Yarlung Zangbo river are along the collision boundary of the Indian plate and Eurasian plate.
 - The glaciers have been retreating because of climate change. Deforestation, soil erosion and landslides are some of the other issues.
- **Water as a Weapon during Standoff:**
 - Being an upstream area, China has an advantage in building dams and other infrastructure to store or divert the flow of the river system.
 - There is the potential to significantly change the flow rate during times of standoff between the countries.
 - During the 2017 Doklam border standoff between India and China, China stopped communication of water flow levels from its dams.

Way Forward

- By terming water resources in Tibet as a 'commons', India can now draw international attention. China must be pressurized to reconsider signing of 1996 UN Convention on Non- Navigation Use of Water which requires watercourse states to cooperate on the equitable and reasonable use and management of international watercourses.
- India should strengthen agreements with China that require the latter to share hydrological data of the river during monsoon season between May and October to alert downstream areas in the event of floods.
- India to articulate its middle riparian position, first to change the perception in the neighbourhood that India is a 'water hegemon'.
- India should draw China into the South Asian water equation through a multilateral basin approach, thereby sensitising China to downstream concerns and upstream responsibilities.
- Water Treaty on lines of Indus and Ganga Treaty should be devised with China for rivers originating from Tibet region.
- India must initiate a lower riparian coalition, stretching from the Ganga Brahmaputra

Meghna basin to the Mekong, in order to draw China into a water dialogue.

- Tibet has a significant influence over Asia, providing sustenance to some of the world's most productive agricultural zones, so it is the collective responsibility of all riparian states to preserve the ecology of this region.