

Hydro-Political Dynamic and its Security Implications in South Asia

*Jubaida Auhana Faruque

Synopsis:

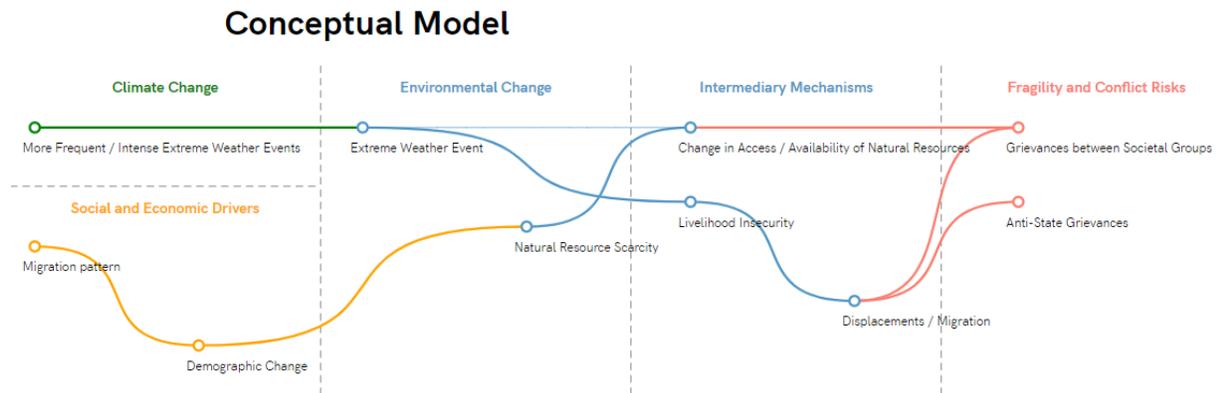
Human civilization evolves surrounding water basin and the countries in South Asia, being mostly developing nations, are expected to induce into hegemonic relation regarding water distribution-based politics. Though armed conflict for water is unlikely, structural violence from it or “water wars”¹ pose significant threat to human security. India being an influential entity here, hydro-political dynamics with other nations like Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan often creates a manifold situation which controls the fate of the security implications in this region.

Commentary:

Most countries in South Asia are agro-based and because of developing industrial projects, use of water in both sectors cause large quantity of consumption and thus increasing demands. Ever increasing population and thereby adding development projects are not only degrading the water quality but also creating a pestilential competition among the countries over bringing in more water within the boundary through overt use of power. It is widely predicted that conflict over water boundary will be the prime issues that countries in this region will be dealing with in this century. (Das, 2016) Decrease in renewable water resources is making the situation dire and due to lack of proper water distribution plans, countries are always in anomaly with each other which is highly affecting the people whose life depends on these resources. Scarcity of water will be leading to deplete in food production resulting in long-term drought which will eventually end up in intra-state or might even inter-state conflicts. Already existing water scarcity has led to development of water irrigation and extraction which is depleting the underground water level

¹ Farley, R., 2021. *What Is a Water War?*. Thediplomat.com. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/what-is-a-water-war/> [Accessed 30 April 2021]

and increasing more scarcity along with salination, trans-boundary pollution and desertification. Furthermore, like rest of the world, this region is a prime victim of climate change which is altering the hydrological balance due to rapid increase in temperature and fluctuation in rainfall intensity.



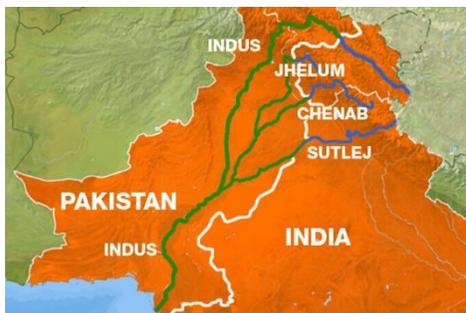
Source: India and Bangladesh Conflict Over the Ganges River. (2021). Retrieved 8 May from <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/india-and-bangladesh-conflict-over-ganges-river>

So continuous climate change is affecting the water level and enhanced energy usage to extract the water is leading to intense climate change which is keeping these countries in a vicious circle of competition. The problem is aggravated because the states are still concentrated on occupying the existing natural sources using their poor management system and not utilizing technologies to be self-sufficient with water. This antagonism is creating a blind spot for the states where each of them is involved in accusing the other of drying them up by building dams and barrages or allowing free flow from the upper stream causing disastrous floods and submersion.

India being a large country and having border with almost all countries in this region, has to get involved into hydro politics will almost all to endure its water supply. India is in year-long hydro tension with Pakistan over the Indus and with Bangladesh over Ganga and Teesta rivers' water control. Though state agreed treaties exist for regulating these shared waters, often states find themselves to differ with each other on the mechanisms to enact these provisions. States are also in a debased situation on virtue of power differences considering India as a hegemony and pursues that these agreements are not enough to ensure equal access to the waters.

Indus Water Treaty:

The Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan has been a major instrument of controlling the Eastern and Western segment of the Indus river, and it has been proved quite effective till now. But the engraining conflict between the countries mainly along the border and interest of India to build two hydro-electric power projects along the shared tributaries with Pakistan, which is under diplomatic discussion in presence of World Bank, is posing a threat to this treaty and additional mechanism is being demanded. Recent revocation of Article 370 has provided India with better opportunities to use these waters for energy production and Pakistan is thus under the threat that India might misuse the treaty and block the water flow downwards. Continuous climate change is disrupting the regulation of water flow throughout these basins and the existing treaty does not tell how to deal with it. Both nations already pose immense agony towards each other and is always under the impression of conflict. The construction of infrastructure to



procure energy by India will possibly create unrest among the locals of the Pakistan whose agriculture and livelihood depend on the continuous flow of these rivers. Indians are also under an impression that they are ‘too much’ abiding by this treaty and is not making the best use out of it, thus might be willing to revoke it which is being titled as “act of war” by Pakistan. (Qamar, Azmat & Claps, 2019).

Moreover, China is giving threats of blocking the source of these rivers from upstream. Now, this treaty has endured so much of aggression including the wars between the countries, consecutive violence at the border and the recent discontent among the riparian regarding adequate access to water, its threshold might face a pressure this time. Countries with nuclear power and so much of belligerence against each other is supposed to have major rivalry over water, the most important source of energy generation in this time. The impulse towards a security threat from this water-sharing situation might evolve from the existing abhorrence between the nations as a retaliation method over other issues and a tendency to topple the other by exertion of power and diplomacy.

The current issue that it is facing is mainly bilateral conflicts between the countries and an innate tendency to exert power. India is trying to gain it all because it has the capability to and that is creating dilemma for Pakistan. An initiative of overall conciliation is ardent in this scenario.

World Bank is acting as a guarantor here which is appreciative in the sense that both countries have agreed for a third-party mediation. For better management the treaty should be brought under a definite forum of International Joint Commissions whose sole purpose would be to deal with the conflicts regarding this treaty.(ibid) This forum should enact all the mechanism of managing this treaty including functioning method, emergency initiatives, bilateral coordination, inclusion of third party, regulated data sharing etc. With the changing situation, the treaty also needs to upgrade with better conflict-management module, climate change preventive measures and legal domain to improve disaster management system.

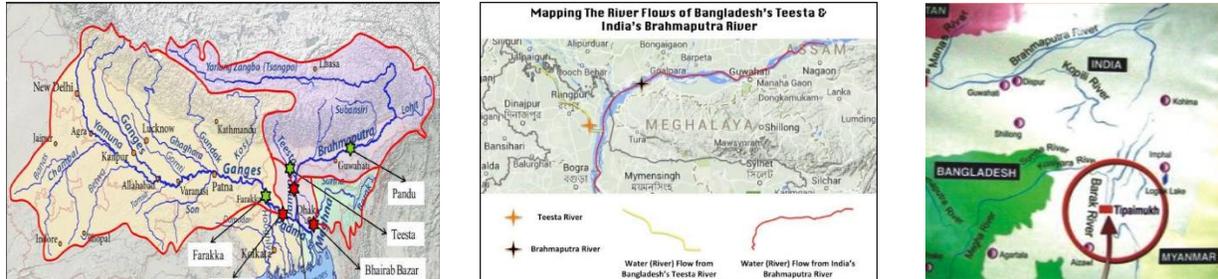
India-Bangladesh water disputes

With surrounded border from almost every sides, it is predominant that Bangladesh and India would engage in long term dispute over water and Bangladesh being the lower hand country both as riparian and hegemonic power exertion, often gets mere part of the deal and in this case water. Sixty years of the Farakkha barrage and twenty-five years of the upgraded treaty has taken this dispute to nowhere but consecutive disastrous situation of either dry season with no harvest or overflowing water destroying the harvest in Bangladesh. With the changing climate and huge explosion of population on both sides, the altered notion of this water basin is being hard to handle and the formed Joint Commission is hardly showing any responsibility. Supply from the source in Nepal is decreasing and thus the amount of water to be divided is reducing. Every year Bangladesh is facing serious water scarcity and salination due to the full-fledged activation of the barrages, often violating the treaty, leading to low food production and continuous desertification in the north and north-eastern region.

Over that, the long due on framing the Teesta treaty is worsening the situation for Bangladesh and thereby its relation with India. Construction of multiple barrages to restrict the water flow and divert the direction has thinned the river entering into Bangladesh and thus creating heavy water scarcity. Rangpur, Dinajpur and the northern regions, the prime crop cultivation places, are lacking irrigation and thus deteriorating the production causing food scarcity all over the country. Unfortunately, India is technically avoiding this particular issue from bringing on the discussion table. Besides, proposal of constructing the Tipaimukhi Dam² on the Borak river is certain to have adverse effects on the north-eastern low-lying regions in destroying the annual production

² Tipaimukh Dam is a proposed embankment dam on the river Barak in Manipur state India, first commissioned in 1983

of Boro cultivations there and will also violate the water rights. Though the discussion has come to a halt after 2013 in the face of massive protest from this side, the governments are still predicted to be studying to commence this project.



The images show the three main water disputes between India and Bangladesh. From the left Farakka, Teesta and Tipaimukhi

Massive internal migration is happening for these reasons and accumulation of huge number of populations in more opportunistic areas are increasing. All these are automatically leading to conflicts that this country would face due to these water distribution mechanisms. The entire economy and livelihoods of people of a country depend on water no matter where an individual resides. The roots of the water supply are mainly in north but they all flow down to the Bay of Bengal and when water regulation from the upper zone is biasedly controlled, lives of the whole population go into hazard. Suburbs do not have proper water supply for agriculture and capitals cannot have enough water for industrialization and daily usage which is affecting the whole economy. That evidently leads to a conflicting situation inside the country, over access to safe water, due to the water being controlled by someone else. So there goes the continuous upbringing of conflict inside the country due to these incompetent managements.

The neighboring country is also feeling the heat of this mismanagement. Due to imbalanced supply of water, natural disaster starting from drought to flood has increased causing massive residual of environmental refugees crossing the border to India. From the 1970s, India is facing this influx of climate induced immigrants which has created consecutive ethnic tension and violence over the distribution of resources ("Violence Over Land in Assam in India", n.d.). Serious anti-Indian apprehension in developing among the people here leading to a excess reaction to any kind of anomaly. When a country is openly seen responsible for drying up the economy of our own, it is hard to maintain the "friendly neighborhood" attitude. Though we are always broadcasting this "Golden era of Friendship" between these nations, the disinterest to solve these water-issues through bilateral negotiation is creating a protracted conflict that will

probably outburst when the situation goes out of control. Since both water disputes are based in the West Bengal state, the election and government there tense the people in this country cause conceivably it depends on that party how Bangladesh will get its basic needs met.

On the other hand, it is also evident that any kind of regional dispute cannot be handled solely and we cannot also change out neighbor, so solution is to come from here. Firstly, a proper upgradation of the Farakkha treaty with the current circumstances is needed and integral implementation of these clauses without any violation is to be ensured. In this case formation of a formal body is also useless since the existing one is not working effectively. Secondly India needs to understand the possibilities of these evolving conflicts and agree to go for a Teesta treaty. Avoiding the situation is causing good for none for various reasons. One of the prime anomalies here is, Bangladesh is interested to involve a third party in the situation but India is reluctant to it. Bangladesh wanted Nepal to be on the treaty since it being the source of Ganga but Nepal could not be convinced for not having any benefits here. Bangladesh also tried to approach China for seeking assistance in the Teesta issue but India does not want its intervention. Inclusion of a third party to mediate in these issues could be a viable solution but any other country will not show its participation unless it has some interests. Also, India's hegemony is threatened if any other regional entity intervenes with its neighbor's dealing. So, one possible solution is to bring the Joint River Commission under the direct surveillance of an international body so that the maintenance, upgradation and insurance of these treaties can be paced up with time. Under this surveillance effective basin management approach, integrated execution mechanism, compulsive capacity building, possible emergency initiatives based on climate change should be cooperated because it should be always acknowledged that any indifference in this water basins might cause upheaving turmoil in the whole region

Other water disputes in South Asia:

Water dispute among other countries in this region mainly persists between Afghanistan-Pakistan, Afghanistan-India, Nepal-India, Bhutan-India. Afghanistan being a barren desert land and a destroyed economy with continuous war, can hardly effort to establish a strong ground on water management. The Kabul river, shared with Pakistan yet does not have any treaty³ and

³ Renner, M. (2009). Water challenges in Central-South Asia. Retrieved 5 May 2021, from <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/137210/No.%204,%20Dec%202009.pdf>

construction of Shahboot dam⁴ by India will be making the situation worse. Afghanistan being a country with extreme water scarcity problems, is seeing no future with its broken infrastructure in managing the situation and the recent halt at war will cause the repatriation of a huge number of refugees leading the demand to rise. Nepal has signed a number of treaties with India regarding water sharing but still the problem stays since it is the origin of most basin and are unlikely to be a part of other treaties.

So, evaluating all the ongoing water-disputes in this region, some factors are very common: lack of proper management, lack of cooperation, no active executionary body, exercise of hegemonic power, continuous climate change and demographic alteration, concentrating on individual gain more than collective sustainability. All these issues separately act as catalyst to breed conflict in a region and all these together can create a disastrous situation. Water is the most important resource for its necessity in every activity. Purification and reuse of sea water or same source is not possible for every country let alone for countries in this region who are still struggling over basic infrastructural development. So, cooperation is the only choice and a proper discussion on each water basin sharing is the key. Every country demands the rightful part from their trans-boundary river and according to the Customary International Law of International Waters⁵, all riparian have the right to use it. But an international convention or regulatory body is needed to ensure that all the treaties are well practiced and countries do not get into violent conflicts over water sharing. If bilateral negotiation is not being possible countries should always be opened for trilateral or multilateral mediation. South Asia being one of the most geographically complicated regions with so many cross-boundary water sources and basins should be more vigilant about this, cause these developing nations cannot afford another century of continuous conflict, over distribution of natural resources so significant as water.

Jubaida Auhana Faruque is a Research Intern at BIPSS. She is currently a final-year student majoring in Peace and Conflict Studies from University of Dhaka. Her main areas of interest are USA Security Policy, Conflict Resolution, Middle-East Security and Climate Diplomacy.

⁴ Ramachandran, S. (2018). India's Controversial Afghanistan Dams. *The Diplomat*.

⁵ Dellapenna, J. (2001). The customary international law of transboundary fresh waters. *International Journal of Global Environmental Issues*, 1(3/4), 264.

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3. ibid
4. Violence Over Land in Assam in India. Retrieved 4 May 2021, from <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/violence-over-land-assam-india>