COMMENTARY

TESTING ‘MUDDY’ WATERS: THE GEOPOLITICS OF ‘TEESTA’ RIVER WATER SHARING

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Testing ‘muddy’ waters: The geopolitics of ‘Teesta’ river water sharing

South Asia is riddled with transboundary disputes, territorial and otherwise. With a population of two billion people and scarce freshwater resources, securing water has emerged as a significant source of regional tensions. Therefore, access to water is a significant political and economic priority for the countries in the region.

The importance of securing water has made it a ‘strategic commodity’ in South Asia, reflected in the water policies of the states in the region. The Indo-Pakistan conflict, the primary inter-state conflict in South Asia, is significantly influenced by the management of the Indus River water. Furthermore, the water issue has aggravated bilateral relations of otherwise friendly states.

The Teesta River dispute between Bangladesh and India is one such contentious issue. Despite remarkable advancements in cooperation across various sectors, the Teesta issue remains a notable source of tension, demonstrating the limits of cooperation between the two neighboring states. While New Delhi tends to view this issue as a routine dispute between state and central governments, Bangladesh perceives it as a failure on India's part to fulfill its commitments. The Teesta issue—while a product of localized internal political dynamics of India—has become a ‘geopolitical’ issue as it has drawn extra-regional attention.

Bangladesh is the world’s largest river delta system with a web of more than 230 rivers and tributaries. However, being a lower riparian country, it depends heavily on rivers originating in upper riparian countries. Out of the 230 rivers flowing over the Bangladesh delta, only one originates within its borders. For instance, Bangladesh and India share 54 transboundary rivers, all of which originate in either India or Tibet. This means the country and its 160 million people are dependent on water resources effectively under the control of external actors. Strategic implications aside, this geographical peculiarity has a disastrous consequence on the country’s natural environment, hydrography and food security. The case of Teesta River sharing issue epitomizes these insecurities in the context of Bangladesh.

The Teesta River originates in the Indian state of Sikkim, travels 414 km through West Bengal and Bangladesh, before being discharged in the Bay of Bengal. The gradual decline of the river system in the country, due to regulatory infrastructures in the upper riparian neighboring countries, pose a ‘non-traditional security’ threat to Bangladesh. This can only be resolved through urgent political and diplomatic interventions.
The Teesta is integral to Bangladesh's food security. Through the Teesta barrage project, approximately 7,50,000 hectares of agricultural land receives irrigation, contributing significantly to the nation's agricultural output. To put this into perspective, in 2020, Bangladesh had a total arable land area of 8 million hectares, of which 5.6 million hectares were under irrigation. Therefore, the Teesta River basin constitutes 13% of the country's overall irrigation system, enabling Bangladeshi farmers to cultivate in three cropping seasons annually. Furthermore, the Teesta plays a vital role in shaping the socio-economic landscape of Bangladesh. It directly and indirectly sustains the livelihoods of 7.3% of the country's population. This substantial percentage underscores the river's significance in supporting local communities while maintaining economic stability.

Secondly, the Teesta River is important in the country's broader ecological context. The Farakka River barrage has already reduced surface water flow in the Northern part of Bangladesh. This, in conjunction with the constrained flow of water in the Teesta River, has exacerbated an already precarious situation. As a result, many farmers have resorted to extracting underground freshwater reserves to compensate for the deficit in surface water resources. Consequently, this practice has yielded adverse outcomes, including land degradation and, ultimately, the spread of desertification across a substantial swathe of northern Bangladesh. In the long term, these ongoing practices may give rise to a significant ecological challenge for the nation, marked by the depopulation of a substantial portion of its territory and a profound impact on food production.

Despite these catastrophic ramifications, Bangladesh and India have been unable to reach an equitable solution on the Teesta River issue. The Indian side built Gazaldoba barrage in 1985 in West Bengal which diverted approximately 85% of the river's water for irrigation purposes creating water scarcity in Bangladesh. Bangladesh needs 5000 cusecs of water to sustain irrigation in the Teesta River basin. However, the country is only receiving 1200-1500 cusecs, dropping to 200-300 cusecs in certain periods. An ad-hoc agreement was reached in 1983 between both parties at a Joint River Commission (JRC) meeting, which determined that Bangladesh would receive 36% of the total water. However, the agreement did not materialize as Bangladesh never received the agreed portion, especially in the dry seasons. In 2011, both nations negotiated a comprehensive, long-term agreement to distribute Teesta water. The proposed arrangement allocated 37.5% of the river's water to Bangladesh, reserving 42.5% for Indian usage. However, the draft agreement was vetoed by the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, who argued that such an arrangement would reduce water supply to the northern district of the state.

**Teesta Question: India's internal dynamics and Geopolitics**

The Teesta conundrum hinges on India's complex domestic political calculations. The issue has become a focal point of Bengali sub-nationalism in West Bengal.
West Bengal is a political battleground between Mamata's Trinamool Congress party and the BJP. The 2019 Indian general election and 2021 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election demonstrated the close competition between the two parties with BJP cutting into TMC's traditional support base. In response, Mamata Banerjee has adopted Bengali regionalism to counter BJP. By blocking the Teesta agreement, Mamata Banerjee has a political imperative to show her base that she prioritizes Bengal's interest on the issue. Ironically, it is also difficult for BJP, in both state and center, to openly support such an agreement with Bangladesh as it could potentially hurt the party electorally.

The political inaction on India's part pushed Bangladesh to look at other avenues to alleviate the issue of water insecurity. One such alternative involved the implementation of a more efficient water management system within Bangladesh's territory along the Teesta River. In the past, China had expressed a keen interest in providing financial support for such a project. In response, Bangladesh has approached Beijing for loans to facilitate the realization of the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TRCMRP). The comprehensive project boasts several key components, including the dredging of 108 kilometers of the riverbed, the construction of embankments spanning 173 kilometers on both sides of the river, and the establishment of a substantial reservoir to store water during the monsoon season. These measures collectively aim to guarantee a sustained water supply during the dry season. Bangladesh has sought a loan of $750 million to fund the entirety of this $980 million project.

While the preliminary evaluation of the project has fallen short of Chinese standards, Beijing has urged Bangladesh to resubmit its plan if the country believes the project is “really necessary”. China likely aims to assess Bangladesh's determination to proceed with the project, a move that could potentially antagonize New Delhi. There is also a certain degree of apprehension in Dhaka to accept Chinese funding (and technical expertise) to complete the project as the ruling Awami League (AL) government is considered to be a close partner of India. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has addressed many Indian security concerns such as terrorism and cross border insurgency since coming to power in 2009. Under her leadership, the two countries have also signed a series of bilateral agreements to enhance connectivity, with Bangladesh providing transit and transshipment access to landlocked Indian states in the North-East.

The geopolitical sensitivity of the project arises from concerns raised by various Indian analysts on China's intentions in financing a project located in close proximity to strategically significant corridor known as the 'chicken neck'. The chicken neck, or Siliguri corridor, has been perceived by many in India as a vital choke point to connect the North-East region with the country's mainland. The narrow corridor is heavily militarized and, in India's point of view, indispensable for military maneuvers in case of any future conflict with China. The corridor is...
also geopolitically critical as it serves as an economic gateway with South-East Asia, thus crucial to New Delhi's 'Act East' policy. Hence, Chinese presence, even purely commercial in nature, near the corridor is perceived as a threat to Indian national security.

**Teesta and future of Indo-Bangladesh ties**

The Teesta issue is a highly polarizing subject in Bangladeshi politics. While the Awami League has returned to power in the 2024 general election for a fourth consecutive term, the party remains politically vulnerable due to its strong pro-India inclinations. AL's failure to secure major concessions on the Teesta issue is rallying factor for Bangladesh's opposition parties, who continue to portray it as a sign of the government's “weak” regional standing vis-à-vis India, and its inability to pursue a so-called ‘independent foreign policy’.

Awami League, under Sheikh Hasina, has adopted a party-oriented realist foreign policy, maintaining amicable and balanced ties with both China and India. This strategy has proved to be politically successful. Amidst Western criticism on the state of democracy in Bangladesh, both Beijing and New Delhi steadfastly defended the Hasina government after the 2024 general election. However, India's unwillingness to concede on the Teesta River issue is widely unpopular in Bangladesh, and the allegation of India 'not upholding its commitments' deeply resonates with a large section of the population.

With an ongoing economic crisis at home, Bangladesh will find it challenging to maintain its balanced approach towards both India and China simultaneously. 'Development', especially infrastructural development, has always been the essential basis of legitimacy for successive governments in Bangladesh. Chinese state-owned enterprises are one of the biggest players in Bangladesh's infrastructure sector, and Chinese investment is becoming a critical source of financing for many of the country's economic sectors. Given the country's volatile economic situation, the government may choose to strengthen economic partnership with Beijing without raising the threshold of Western concerns. This could involve deepening economic partnerships by endorsing additional China-backed projects, like the revival of the Teesta restoration project. This would serve two crucial purposes for the government: addressing the country's financial challenges in the short term, and bolstering the narrative of pursuing an 'autonomous' foreign policy. At the same time, it would also indicate to New Delhi the need to be more accommodating on the Teesta and other bilateral issues.

Over the past fifteen years, bilateral cooperation between India and Bangladesh has grown significantly, to the extent that Dhaka has become New Delhi's closest partner in South Asia and occupies a central position in India's ‘neighborhood first’ policy. While both countries have obvious differences across a range of issues, a number of bilateral disputes have been resolved in a peaceful and sensible
manner. The resolution of land boundary disputes in 2015 shows that bilateral issues can actually be solved if the leadership is willing to master enough political will. As the bigger and more powerful neighbor, the burden of this ‘political will’ falls squarely on the shoulder of the Indian leadership. The ball, therefore, is in India’s court to decide the fate of the Teesta agreement.

Endnotes


