

# India - China Water Dispute: An Overview

Dr. Akanksha

Sri Guru Gobind Singh College, Chandigarh, India

**Abstract:** *This paper delves into the water dispute between India and China, focusing on the Brahmaputra River, a transboundary water resource shared by these two nations. The study explores the geopolitical, environmental, and historical factors contributing to the dispute, with China's dam-building activities and strategic control over the river's upper reaches being key points of contention. The paper also discusses the potential impacts of these activities on downstream countries, particularly India. Despite the ongoing tensions, the study highlights recent cooperative efforts between the two countries to address the dispute, suggesting a positive shift in their relations. However, it emphasizes the need for continued dialogue, transparency, and mutual understanding to achieve a sustainable and equitable resolution. The paper concludes by underscoring the importance of proactive and innovative strategies to foster more cohesive water relations amidst the challenges posed by climate change, increasing water demand, and geopolitical complexities.*

**Keywords:** India - China Water Dispute, Brahmaputra River, Transboundary Water Resources, Water Diplomacy, Sustainable Water Management

## 1. Introduction

Water remains a politically contested issue in almost all the South Asian countries. The region faces serious water shortage having agrarian focused economy with rapid industrialisation the increasing demand of water and energy poses severe challenges. There are many reasons such as over-extraction of ground water, salinity and arsenic contamination and impact of climate change on the water flow of certain river basin's given by the scholars in academia, are pressing the need to prompt reconsideration in bilateral water-sharing treaties. The United Nations identifies the water disputes can occur from opposing interests of water users be it for the public or private purpose. Despite having several water conflicts among nations there has been hardly a traditional war waged over water issue alone. However, Water has been a historical source of contention and a factor in conflicts which has been risen due to other reasons such as territorial disputes, a fight of natural resources and strategic advancement in this highly competitive era.

Though water resources are in abundance in the world but spatial disparity of the fresh water resources compounded with seasonal scarcity and climate change has made this issue as an acute threat for many countries at global level. One of the prominent examples of such threats are between India and China over Brahmaputra River. Both India and China, two most populous and thirsty nations in the world share many transboundary rivers among which Brahmaputra is the most contentious one. The Brahmaputra River originates from the Tibetan plateau and flows across southern Tibet through the Himalayas enters India merge with the Ganges and empty itself in the Bay of Bengal. The expansion of population and rapid economic growth of China caused the water shortage in all riparian states. Therefore, many hydropower projects were initiated by China to contain the water shortage issue by building dams, etc. One of the largest hydropower project Zangmu Dam was completed in 2014 on Brahmaputra River (Zhang: 2016). During this period, many national as well as international security observers warned that there might be a possibility of water wars between India and China. Further, this warning

seems to be real because of the ongoing persistent border disputes between the two.

Therefore, it would be inappropriate to say that water issues can emerge as a major deciding factor of Sino-India relations considering the fact of rapidly increasing demand of water. In the section below, one has tried to briefly explain the entire gamut of water dispute between India and China.

### Shared Rivers and the Rise of Water Dispute between the Two Countries

Majorly four rivers water is shared by these two countries, India and China but it is not exclusively shared by them. For example the Brahmaputra River is shared by India, China, Bangladesh and Bhutan. In fact all transboundary rivers of India and China is shared with other neighbouring countries in the region. China enjoys the upper riparian country status in all transboundary rivers. And among all the rivers, the most contentious one is Brahmaputra River.

According to Zhang there are three major reasons which has affected the relations between the two countries over water. These reasons are as follows:

- Even though, China is upper riparian state but it only occupies significant parts of the Brahmaputra River among all the transboundary rivers. China has over 50 per cent of the Brahmaputra river basin area. Therefore, it gives an advantage to the country when it comes to activities which will have a potential impact in a way bigger than other countries in comparison to other rivers.
- The Brahmaputra River holds great importance to both the countries. For India, it is a source for freshwater as well as important hydropower projects. It constitutes a total of 40 per cent hydropower potential of the country. As for China, it is great importance to Tibet region. It is considered the birthplace of Tibetan civilization which plays critical role in agricultural and energy sectors. However, at national level it does not quite contribute much as a freshwater source of the country.
- Another major reason is the strategic importance of the Brahmaputra River. It is linked to the Sino-India border dispute. India and China both have claims in the Eastern

Himalayas from the west to Brahmaputra River in the East along with the crest of Himalayas.

The above mentioned reasons are a few highlighted one which has contributed in escalating tensions between India and China over water issues. However, both countries have issued different opinion regarding the same. In Indian perspective, China deliberately building these dams on Brahmaputra River because it will have an adverse effect on the downstream countries such as India and Bangladesh. The proponents of this theory also believe that water war will break between these two countries primarily focus on the future of Brahmaputra River. According to these scholars China will be facing severe shortage of water in future and it will try to divert the water towards dry north. The north region is highly industrialised and populated in comparison to the south. Therefore, to meet the demand country has to divert the major source of freshwater towards the dry region. And it will pose a serious threat on fresh water availability in the downstream countries such as India. This theory has been proved by the scholars because of China's unwillingness to sign any binding agreement with downstream countries over transboundary Rivers. China has been insisting on the absolute sovereignty of water principle and it might cause a significant harm to downstream countries. They also underline the lack of transparency from Chinese side is further aggravating the situation.

However, China has been denying all these Indian concerns by calling them premature. China has not approved any major water diversion project in Tibet region. In fact, according to the spokesperson Indian security analysts, media and politicians are unnecessarily getting worried about the Sino - Indian water conflicts. China has been showing little or no interest in the topic. Chinese Ministry of Foreign affairs and Ministry of Water Resources has been forced to respond on the activities along upper stream of the river. Even during major bilateral summits Chinese President and Premier have reassured their Indian counterparts that their dam building activities will not harm India's interests. Some scholars have suspected that India is exaggerating and making unreasonable demands to justify their own dam construction plans especially in the disputed area of Arunachal Pradesh (South Tibet in China).

One can say that the blame game has been constant in these two countries especially after the year of 2013 and 2014. The standoffs between India and China over disputed territory also has fuelled the tensions. Also Chinese does have a track record of relaying on mega - infrastructure projects such as Three Gorge Dams and South - North Water Diversion to deal with its water shortage. Basically these projects highlight the discussion in diverting Brahmaputra river water towards dry north part of the region.

In the recent developments, after the border standoffs between the two, India has been complaining that china has stopped sharing its hydrological data with India which they need it during the monsoon season to divert the flood situation in downstream countries. China has been saying that its hydrological stations are being upgraded that is why it is not possible to share the data.

## 2. Future Prospects

The ongoing cooperation between India and China in addressing the water dispute marks a positive turning point in their relations. It signifies a willingness on both sides to put aside historical differences and work together for a common cause. By continuing to build on the existing frameworks of cooperation, both countries can ensure a sustainable and equitable sharing of water resources in the region.

## 3. Conclusion

The India - China water dispute has been a complex and sensitive issue, deeply entwined with historical, geopolitical, and environmental factors. While a conclusive resolution may still be on the horizon, the strides made in recent years towards cooperation and data sharing are promising signs. As both nations move forward, it is crucial for them to uphold the principles of dialogue, transparency, and mutual understanding to find a lasting solution that benefits the people and the environment of the entire region. Ultimately, a successful resolution of the water dispute will set a positive precedent for peaceful cooperation between India and China on other critical matters as well

To conclude one can say that though Sino - Indian water relations have unquestionably improved over the period of time. It has survived deep political tensions which have occurred quite frequently between the two countries over disputed Himalayan territories. However, in the coming future, both countries need to face the hard challenges owing to climate change, increasing demand for water, reduced flow of water and besides these, China and India will continue engage with other more intensively on border issues. Their attempt to sustain geopolitical interests and to increase the influence in the region will constantly pose the complexity in the geopolitical reality. For better water relation both will have to develop a proactive and innovative strategy for more cohesive water relations.

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