

PERSPECTIVE

Hydropolitics intertwined with geopolitics in the Brahmaputra River Basin

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Abstract

The legacy of the sub-continent has led to a complex geopolitical rivalry in the Brahmaputra River Basin, shared by China, India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Each riparian state has a varying interest and development agenda, hindering the identification of common interests for water cooperation. This article presents the intertwining of regional geopolitics with the basin hydropolitics, restraining positive interaction, thus, leading to a status quo in the BRB. While maintaining a purposeful status quo seems to be a prudent move by the riparians, the local communities continue to suffer due to the impasse.

This article is categorized under:

Human Water > Water Governance

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KEYWORDS

Brahmaputra River Basin, geopolitics, hydropolitics, power, status quo, transboundary waters

1 | THE BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER BASIN

The Yarlung Zangbo–Brahmaputra–Jamuna (henceforth, the Brahmaputra River Basin [BRB]), originates in the Tibet Autonomous Region and is shared by four sovereign nations—China, India, Bangladesh, and Bhutan (Figure 1). The Brahmaputra is a rich repository of economic benefits such as hydropower, irrigation, and inland water navigation, apart from holding immense social and cultural significance for the river-dependent communities. The development in the basin is impeded due to varying national interests, historical and contemporary rivalries, and territorial disputes (Barua & Vij, 2018; He, 2021).

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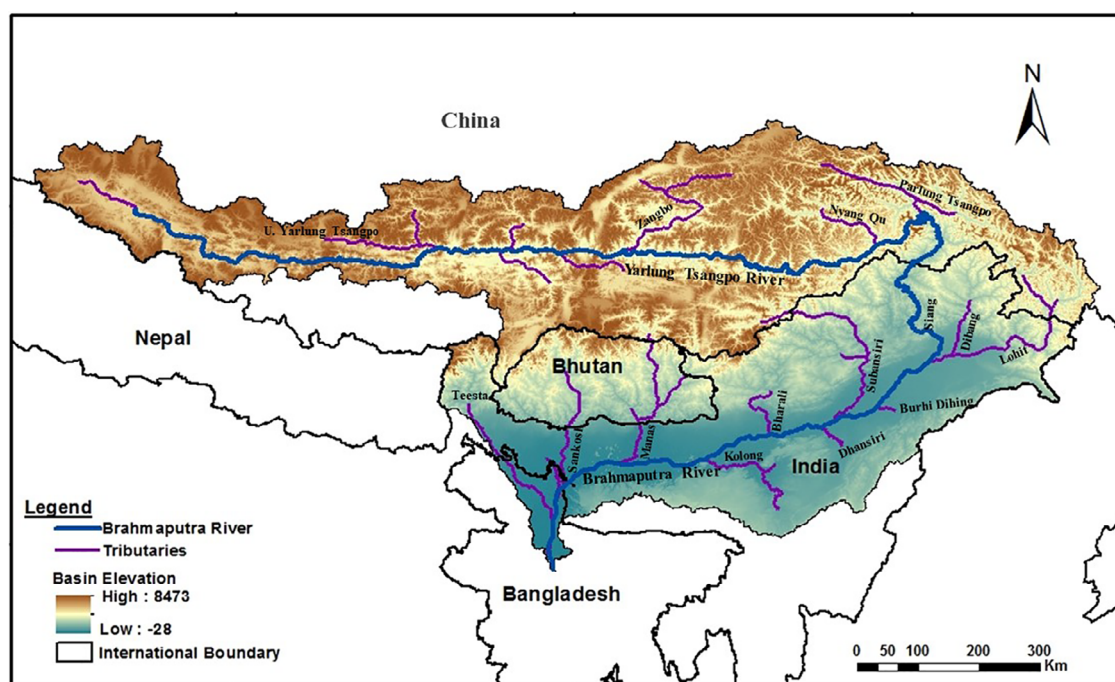


FIGURE 1 Map of Brahmaputra Basin. Source: Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, India

The riparians have failed to identify common grounds to cooperate for the development of the basin (Barua et al., 2018). In this piece, we expound on hydropolitics between the riparians of the Brahmaputra and how regional geopolitics contributes to the present *cul-de-sac*.

2 | EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA BASIN

Geopolitics can be defined as the causal relationship between political power and geographic space on the relative power position among countries; leading to advantages and vulnerabilities to national security from territorial and maritime space (Scott, 2008). In other words, geopolitics explains countries' demonstration of power over the control of strategically significant geographical entities for meeting political interests. Transboundary water is especially one such territorially embedded factor used as a power consolidation mechanism by nation-states and in the process, transforms it into a weapon of domination and legitimacy (Daoudy, 2020). In the BRB, relations between riparian countries are ridden with varying degrees of geopolitical contestation and diverse national interests.

2.1 | Hindi–Chini Bhai–Bhai predicament?

China–India relationship has been volatile due to territorial disagreements prevailing since British rule in the sub-continent. The formation of the Republic of India in 1947 and the People's Republic of China in 1949 bequeathed the colonial maps of a disputed border (Bhasin, 2021; Guruswamy & Singh, 2009; Xuecheng, 2011). The territorial dispute eventually led to an open border conflict in 1962 and a Line of Actual Control (LAC), instead of a settled boundary. While several boundary agreements to maintain peace and stability were inked in the 1990s and economic ties picked up in the 2000s, the relationship has continued to be bedeviled by conflicting territorial claims and counterclaims and competing infrastructure development along the LAC (Garver, 2011; Guruswamy & Singh, 2009). In the last decade, China's border transgressions have particularly escalated with the Depsang standoff in 2013 and the Doklam standoff in 2017 involving Bhutan, indicating a change in approach by the Chinese to border issues with India (Jacob, 2017b).

It is perhaps not until the Galwan valley clash in 2020, which resulted in fatalities on both sides that the Indian side seems to have recognized these changes (Jacob, 2022).

The unresolved border issue continues to be the main element impinging bilateral relations between China and India. Further, India's consequent hosting of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan exiles came at the cost of China's displeasure. From a national security perspective, the geopolitical location of Tibet holds immense strategic importance, generating rivalry and fear between these Asian giants (Topgyal, 2011). China was threatened by India's refusal to recognize Chinese sovereignty over Tibet before 1950. Similarly, India feared that the resolution of the Tibet issue might lead the Dalai Lama and Tibetan government-in-exile reluctantly to yield to Chinese pressure in support of Beijing's boundary claims (Topgyal, 2011). Related to the Tibet issue is the dispute in the eastern sector of the border along the McMahon Line, an outcome of the Simla conference in 1914 (Rao, 2021; Xuecheng, 2011). Following China's occupation of Tibet, it was only in the late 1980s that Beijing began paying greater attention to its claims over the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh calling it "South Tibet" (Raghavan, 2019). Since then, it has been noted that the Dalai Lama's visit to the state of Arunachal Pradesh produces tension in the China-India relationship.¹ Moreover, with both China and India prioritizing bilateralism and disapproving of any third-party intervention in matters of territorial sovereignty (Barua et al., 2018; Ho, 2016), this has also meant that contestation on other bilateral issues such as transboundary rivers has not received due attention (Chellaney, 2008).

Increased geostrategic competition is another aspect of tense China-India bilateral relations. China is vying for an increasing foothold in South Asian countries, which were traditionally under India's overwhelming predominance, thus, generating strategic insecurity for India (Freeman, 2018). China's expanding trade and infrastructural investments in Bangladesh, for instance, puts India in discomfort, given that it might undermine India's influence in the country.² India believes such actions might enable China to win concessions from Bhutan and Bangladesh related to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which India has refused to join on the grounds of national sovereignty and "debt-trap" diplomacy (Ahmed & Sheikh, 2021; Jacob, 2017a).

Nevertheless, though China made economic inroads, India's dominant role in shaping the economic and political configurations in Bhutan and Bangladesh gives India additional leverage, hailed as "blood ties" (Hossain & Islam, 2021; Paul, 2019).

2.2 | Jealous big-brother attitude

The strong foundation of Bhutan-India diplomatic relations evolved from the 1949 Peace and Friendship treaty, granting India an advisor status in Bhutan's external relations and not a domestic intervenor. Without a history of geopolitical rivalry, mutual trust resulted in significant economic benefits for both countries through hydropower cooperation (Saklani et al., 2020; Tortajada & Saklani, 2018). It also provided political and security benefits to India as it prevented any coalition between Bhutan and China (Yasuda et al., 2017). The landlocked Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is a buffer for India after China annexed Tibet. The Bhutan-India symbiotic relationship is also seen as India being a benevolent hegemon with a "jealous big-brother attitude" and hampering Bhutan's engagement with China (Mishra, 2019). It must also be mentioned that critics in Bhutan are against their country's heavy dependency on India and seek economic diversification (Sarki, 2019).

India being geographically positioned between Bhutan and Bangladesh, the initiation of the Bhutan-Bangladesh hydropower trade requires India's support. For enabling such trade, India gave its consent to Bangladesh for investing in the Bhutanese hydropower project in 2016 (Paul, 2019; Yasuda et al., 2017). Bhutan was the first country to recognize Bangladesh after the latter's independence in 1971. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1973.³ Without any geopolitical complexities, Bhutan and Bangladesh share cordial bilateral ties through trade (routed via India).

2.3 | Estranged ties between China and Bhutan

Although neighbors since 1951, China and Bhutan have had no diplomatic relations; Bhutan does not even have a Chinese consulate (Sarki, 2019). China's desire to occupy Bhutan since the 1930s and the daunting act of Tibet's annexation is Bhutan's calculus for embracing India's patronage in its foreign policy (Kaul, 2022; Mishra, 2019;

Pant & Shivamurthy, 2021). China and Bhutan share outstanding border disputes in Central, Western, and Eastern Bhutan, aside this China's expansionist tactics of military outposts and village settlement constructions in Northern Bhutan (Bisht, 2014; Pant & Shivamurthy, 2021). Nevertheless, China resumed border negotiations with Bhutan after the Doklam incident with a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for expediting boundary negotiations and demarcation in 2021.⁴ The Bhutanese Foreign Minister explicitly assured that India's interests in the Doklam tri-junction would not be compromised by China–Bhutan ties.⁵ India perceives less possibility of Bhutan dissenting with India for diplomatically engaging with China, as India has always provided Bhutan with military security and economic aid (Pant & Shivamurthy, 2021). However, for Bhutan, being geographically wedged between two Asian giants and diplomatically under India's sphere of influence, maneuvering strategic negotiations with both can be testing; Bhutan cannot afford to hurt India's sentiments while preferring to embrace China (Kaul, 2022).

2.4 | Mango diplomacy between neighbors

Besides political upheavals in bilateral relations and typical border-related problems, India–Bangladesh never fought any border war against each other (Hossain & Islam, 2021; Sur, 2014). The changing contours of Bangladesh's domestic politics under its two major political parties—the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party determined the type of foreign policy implemented with India, friendly or adversarial (Kumar, 2014).

However, Bangladesh acknowledges India's wholehearted assistance to its independence (Chowdhury, 2013). As historical allies since the 1971 Liberation War, India–Bangladesh disagreements persist over the riverine border created by the Brahmaputra, resulting in cross-border smuggling, insurgencies, and illegal immigration to India (Samaranayake et al., 2018). The alleged encroachment of the *chars* (islands created during dry season) and *Sattra* lands (Vaishnavite monasteries) in Assam by Bangladeshi immigrants tainted the social milieu of Assam. The ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement in 2015 created a new chapter in Bangladesh–India relations, but issues like the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) created impediments to deepening bilateral relations (Hossain & Islam, 2021).

The two nations' shared history is, however, often glorified through the Ganges water sharing treaty, based on flow allocation near their mutual borders. But water arrangements agreed upon through this agreement are perceived as asymmetric and unjust by Bangladesh (de Micheaux et al., 2018) and blame India for its noncompromising attitude (Islam, 2021). Despite these issues, India–Bangladesh exhibits warm relations, with annual attempts to make it sweeter through Bangladesh's practice of “mango diplomacy”, the emblematic Bangladeshi produce.⁶ Mango diplomacy is an age-old South Asian tradition of using mangoes as a diplomatic gift by political leaders (of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), aiming to maintain friendship and improve bilateral ties, along with a wider mix of objectives (Brummell, 2022).

2.5 | Necessary but evolving bonds

China–Bangladesh relations had a hostile beginning as China opposed the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and commenced diplomatic relations only later in 1975 (Yasuda et al., 2017). Despite such opposition, Bangladesh has now developed robust strategic and defense cooperation with China, besides giving full support to the BRI project (Hossain & Islam, 2021). On its part, China committed to approximately \$1 billion investment for the mega Teesta River management project.⁷ This will secure Bangladesh's lean season flow, reducing dependence on India and perhaps making the stalled Teesta agreement redundant. The 8th China–Bangladesh friendship bridge is ready for inauguration by the Bangladeshi government after the completion of seven such bridges with Chinese grants.⁸ Though not financially, Chinese companies were involved in a technical capacity in the recently inaugurated Padma bridge, Bangladesh's biggest infrastructure project as confirmed by Bangladesh.⁹ China's growing bonhomie with Bangladesh depicts strategic connotation as China considers the geostrategic location of Bangladesh as the preferred route to reach north-eastern India and lay territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh, besides meeting energy demand from Bangladesh's rich reserves of natural gas (Ghoshal, 2010). Additionally, China is interested in port development in Bangladesh for expanding trade routes via access to the Indian Ocean Region (Hossain & Islam, 2021).

3 | HYDROPOLITICAL NUANCES IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER BASIN

Hydropolitics is defined as the authoritative allocation, contested use, and management of the security underpinnings of transboundary water resources whereby power and politics determine over time who gets what, how much, and why, highlighting the continuum of conflict and cooperation of riparian nations (Meissner, 2014). In the BRB, the interplay of power and information asymmetry in the broader geopolitical context has led to water securitization (Barua et al., 2018; Xie & Warner, 2021), thus making water an issue of national sovereignty (Hanasz, 2017). The existing MoUs on hydrological data sharing in the BRB address specific aspects (particularly flood management) of the broader issue of integrated water management (Barua et al., 2018; Liu, 2015). These MoUs do not include any mechanism of dispute settlement related to data sharing, thus, limiting the legal reach of the MoUs (Liu, 2015). MoUs are the Chinese way of wielding soft power and conducting reactive diplomacy in response to downstream requests, often through a one-river, one-country approach (Wouters & Chen, 2013; Zhang & Li, 2018).

Unilateral hydropower development plans have been fast-tracked in the BRB since the turn of the millennium, leading to competitive prior appropriation rights of China and India in their part of the basin (Ho, 2017). China completed the Zangmu dam in 2014 (Zhang, 2015) and is currently constructing five multipurpose dams in the upper part of the Yarlung Zangbo for hydropower and irrigation purposes (Zhang et al., 2019).

Although they are run-of-the-river hydropower dams, the fear of potential negative impacts on downstream livelihoods is inconclusive due to a lack of sufficient scientific knowledge (Zhang et al., 2019). Similarly, in the Indian part of the basin, plans are underway for many hydroelectric projects (Borgohain, 2019; Thakur, 2020). These projects are resented by riverine communities and environmental activists as they may damage the river ecosystem, increase the rural poor's vulnerability, and intensify the Himalayan zone's seismicity (Baruah, 2012). China's ambitious mega-dam at the Tsangpo Grand Canyon also received approval in 2021 after years of denial on grounds of technical implausibility.¹⁰ India retaliated by announcing a dam in Assam for flood control.¹¹ The outcome of such a “dam-for-dam” strategy looms large among riparian communities. Both countries' commitments to the Paris Climate Agreement (COP 21) and the Glasgow Climate Conference (COP 26), pledging to reduce carbon emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 and 2070, respectively, reflect their climate action priorities of transforming to renewable energy. Hence, there is a race for harnessing the hydropower potential of the River and gaining water rights.

Bhutan's ambitious climate policy for retaining carbon-negative status requires a climate-resilient development pathway through hydropower generation—the country's economic backbone.¹² This will create a rush toward harnessing the hydropower potential of the BRB. For Bangladesh, transitioning to a developing country status, Brahmaputra's importance lies in enhancing food security through irrigated agriculture and boosting the country's water-intensive manufacturing export sector.¹³

Fragmented cooperation in the basin has failed to eliminate insecurity and build trust between the riparians (Deka, 2021; He, 2021). Consequently, speculations are widespread in the BRB. For instance, certain public discourse in India blames Chinese activities behind flash floods, murky flows, and seasonal drying up of the Brahmaputra and speculates upstream diversion; whereas China links any Indian water intervention to diplomatic sabotage in the territory it claims (Chen et al., 2014; Deka, 2021).

Further, India's water infrastructure plans make Bangladesh anxious about the altered flow regime impacting their lives and livelihoods. India failed to deliver on the Teesta water-sharing agreement because of domestic politics between the federal and the state government. Such experiences¹⁴ make Bangladesh apprehensive about signing another bilateral accord with India on the Brahmaputra, deliberately pursuing “non-decision making” (Vij et al., 2020). Reportedly, there is growing resentment toward the social and environmental impacts of hydropower projects in Bhutan (Saklani & Tortajada, 2019). Hence, securing India's future energy supply from Bhutanese hydropower is a question of time, prodding India to unilaterally utilize the BRB waters to be self-sufficient. Moreover, regular catastrophic dam-induced floods caused by Bhutan in the districts of lower Assam have raised public resentment.¹⁵

4 | “STATUS QUO”, A PURPOSEFUL STRATEGY FOR THE BRAHMAPUTRA BASIN?

The BRB suffers from stereotypical upstream–downstream syndrome intertwined with the influence of geopolitics in framing water interactions. The dynamic geopolitics, coupled with the riparians' competing and growing water–energy–food demands, poses hydropolitical challenges capable of pushing water interaction toward the spectrum of

conflict. The nuances of hydropolitics mean that the River is used to determine the relative power position of India and China, creating both opportunities and vulnerabilities for the riparian countries.

As a corollary, mutual security concerns and the border stalemate between China and India overshadow BRB management. Subtle cooperation is acknowledged that MoU-backed seasonal data sharing is in place but undoubtedly is at the bottom rung of any comprehensive cooperation. A recent instance of hydropolitics intertwined with geopolitics was when China leveraged its geographical position against India by withholding hydrological data after the Doklam border crisis but continued sharing it with Bangladesh, which China later clarified was due to monitoring stations' maintenance.

The challenging hydropolitics intertwined with geopolitics in the BRB has resulted in a purposeful status quo. China and India maintain the status quo to gain water rights to pursue unilateral decision-making for achieving their respective development agendas. Bangladesh, based on its experience with India on Ganges and Teesta treaties, prefers an impasse, strengthening its technical and negotiation skills. Bhutan, an upstream riparian, is not affected by the existing status quo, showing little interest in negotiations for basin-level cooperation. Maintaining the status quo is a cautious strategy by the riparians for avoiding overt conflicts; however, such an impasse at the regional and national level has made the Brahmaputra a contested river, and the local communities continue to suffer from annual floods.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Tanushree Baruah: Conceptualization (equal); data curation (lead); formal analysis (equal); investigation (equal); methodology (equal); resources (equal); writing – original draft (lead); writing – review and editing (equal). **Anamika Barua:** Conceptualization (equal); data curation (supporting); formal analysis (equal); resources (supporting); supervision (lead); writing – review and editing (lead). **Sumit Vij:** Conceptualization (lead); data curation (supporting); formal analysis (equal); resources (equal); supervision (lead); writing – review and editing (lead).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/dalai-lamas-arunachal-pradesh-visit-negatively-impacts-border-dispute-says-china/articleshow/58144382.cms>.

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- ⁷ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/the-hindu-explains-what-does-chinese-interest-in-the-teesta-mean-for-india/article32420205.ece>.
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- ¹³ Bangladesh National Conservation Strategy (2016–2031).
- ¹⁴ The Farakka and Teesta barrage, and the proposed Tipaimukh dam.
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