INDIA CHINA WATER RELATIONS

WHY IN NEWS?

China has undertaken various projects across the border while India has been insisting on greater water cooperation between the two countries

BACKGROUND

Brahmaputra River water sharing is the major flashpoint between India and China. China has not been forthcoming in sharing the details about water level in the Brahmaputra, that is of great importance to the Indian side to predict or prepare for sudden and huge flood. Moreover Chinese construction of dams and water diversion projects threatens the downstream countries including India

1 RIVER SYSTEM BETWEEN INDIA - CHINA

Trans-border rivers flowing from China to India fall into two main groups –

- The Brahmaputra River System on the Eastern side consisting river Siang (main stream of river Brahmaputra) and its tributaries i.e. Subansiri and Lohit
- The Indus River System on the Western side consists of river Indus and the river Sutlej

2 WATER COOPERATION BETWEEN INDIA-CHINA

There is no institutionalised mechanism on water cooperation between India and China, both countries have signed only -

- MoU for Hydrological Information of the River Brahmaputra in 2002 and in 2010 MoU on Hydrological Data Sharing on River Sutlej / Langqen Zangbo (renewed in 2015).
- ELM (Expert Level Mechanism) to cooperate in emergency management (e.g. flood), trans-border Rivers issues etc in 2006

3 ISSUES IN INDIA - CHINA WATER RELATIONS

Multilateral Approach: China's approach is multilateral arrangements unlike India which prefers bilateral relations with its riparian nations E.g. In 2015, China signed the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework along with five other countries as an alternative to the Asian Development Bank-led Mekong River Commission, which China never signed. (The LMC focuses on land and water connectivity, besides river management.)

Projects undertaken by China on Tibetan side lacks Transparency

Suboptimal Cooperation: Currently China only shares hydrological data on the Yarlung Tsangpo/Brahmaputra (YTB) and Satluj during the monsoon season

Differential Approach: In South Asia, China is interested in establishing greater ties with Bangladesh on flood forecasting and water management

Border Dispute: Affects the discussion on more pressing issues of who has the right to how much water and the impact of dams & diversions on the upper reaches of the river

CHINESE PROJECTS IN TIBET

Tibet is an area rich in natural resources and rightly called Xizang, or "Western Treasure Land": China is engaged in

- The greatest Water Grab by damming the rivers (Jiexu, Zangmu and Jiacha) on the plateau
- Mineral Mining or the "Gold Rush" to extract precious metals and other resources from Tibetan plateau
- Geo Engineering Experiments to "trigger natural disasters such as floods, droughts & tornadoes to weaken" an enemy in the event of a war

4 IMPLICATIONS OF INDIA - CHINA WATER RELATIONS

Threat to Environmental Pollution due to trans boundary impacts, Siang-Brahmaputra's main artery recently turned blackish grey as it entered India

Major rivers running off the Himalayas, after increasing flows as glaciers melt, can cause Loss 10-20% of Water Flow by 2050, resulting into rivers' low capacity to produce electricity and exacerbate regional political tensions

Tibet is called the "Third Pole" due to its largest perennial ice mass on the planet after the Arctic and Antarctica but now Warming of Tibet Plateau (almost three times the global average) will have major long-term implications for the triple role Tibet plays as Asia's main freshwater repository, largest water supplier and principal rainmaker

Tibet on Chinese side and Himalayan ecosystem on Indian side are one of the world's most bio diverse regions, the reckless exploitation of their mineral & water resources are Threat to biodiversity /ecosystems

The Sino-Indian boundary conflict creates a negative effect on water cooperation; cross-border rivers will be used as a strategic means to influence boundary negotiations

The geo-engineering experiments in Tibet can bring more rain by sucking in moisture from other regions which would potentially weaken monsoons in India and elsewhere in Asia thus opening anew interventionist frontier

Humanitarian Implications: Any disaster including flash flood, landside, dam burst etc can cause widespread loss of life, wildlife, livelihoods and basic infrastructure in not only in India's Northeast but also in Bangladesh

5 CHALLENGES AHEAD

In pursuance of International law of 'Prior Appropriation' India being the first user have rights to use same quantity of water for hydropower projects on Brahmaputra against Chinese dam-building activities. But India needs –

- To envision desired strategic outcomes while dealing with impending water conflicts
- To restrengthen its relationship with lower riparian countries including Bangladesh and restore its image as a Responsible Upper Riparian
- To raise the issue proactively in informal meets such as Wuhan Summit with its firmness in negotiations with China on water rights, as it did in the case of the Doklam stand-off
- To develop mutual cooperation through Himalayan Charter and Himalayan Council for the future of the Himalayas as discussed in third Himalayan Consensus Summit in Nepal
- To improve diplomatic communication by sharing hydrological data, exchange of information regarding infrastructural development, etc.

Simultaneously International pressure needs to be mounted on Beijing –

- To refrain from activities that cause "decline of Tibet's natural resources" and "environmental impairment"
- To respect international environmental standards as Asia's ecological interests cannot be safeguarded unless China is forced

WAY FORWARD

Both the countries need to develop effective Frameworks of Resource Management and a Joint Institutional Mechanism to encourage further cooperation.

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