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Water Disputes in South Asia: Can the Region Come Together?

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Synopsis

Several factors drive water disputes in South Asia. To solve the problems, it is critical to involve even China. Solutions must foster the sharing of water resources through increasing dialogue and building mutual trust.

Commentary

SOUTH ASIA is mired in disputes over water resources despite possessing three large rivers – the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Indus and their tributaries. The disputes emanate from the transboundary nature of these rivers which disregard man-made political and geographical boundaries. The tussle for water resources amongst India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal is now getting complicated with China's entry into the calculus. Increasingly under pressure to address its own water woes, China is taking steps that could create new apprehensions over water in South Asia.

The region has two prominent basins -- the Indus basin in the west and Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin in the east. The waters in the Indus Basin begin from the Tibetan plateau in China, proceed through northern India, eastern Pakistan and drain into the Arabian Sea. The six rivers of the Indus system (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej) are critical to both India and Pakistan. The Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna is India's largest river system with the basin covering an area of 1.7 million square km.

Disputes in the Region

Despite the existence of many bilateral treaties, friction over water resources in South Asia persists. India seems to be particularly involved in the inter-state water frictions by virtue of its location and the fact that it shares borders with all other countries in the region. For instance, on the western frontier, India and Pakistan have differences over interpretations of the long-standing Indus Water Treaty 1960. Pakistan has also been raising concerns over India's construction of dams.

Similarly on the eastern frontier, India and Bangladesh, sharing 54 transboundary rivers, have a mechanism for cooperation in place through the Ganges Water Treaty. Yet, problems over water resources aggravate political tensions between them. Bangladesh alleges that it does not receive a fair share of water. The Farakka barrage built by India across the Ganges and India's proposed plan to link the rivers have raised concerns in Dhaka in the past.

Why the Disputes

The South Asian region faces a number of challenges which sets off and catalyses the water tensions. Firstly, it is a heavily populated region of over 2.5 billion people. If China is included in this statistics the pressure on these finite water resources gets further accentuated. Secondly, most countries in the region are facing water scarcity as a result of which many people do not have access to sufficient drinking water and sanitation. With the burgeoning population, water stress will only grow. For instance, demand for water resources in India is expected to double and exceed 1.4 trillion cubic meters by 2050.

Besides, Pakistan faces the greatest water crunch. According to the Economic Survey of Pakistan 2006-07, water supply was just over 1000 cubic metres per person. A fall below the mark would make it a water scarce country. Climate change in the Himalayan basin increases the problem of water insecurity manifold. According to reports current trends indicate that the three major Himalayan rivers could become seasonal rivers once glaciers melt in the coming three decades.

The problem of water scarcity exacerbating hydro-politics gets worsened by the fact that most of these countries are agrarian economies requiring water-fed irrigation facilities. Water resources are also required to feed demands of industrialisation and urbanisation. The thirst for energy, especially hydro-power is both widespread and pressing. Aggravating the gravity is the gross mismanagement of water resources and lack of adequate water storage facilities.

The regional water disputes are also clearly a legacy of the colonial past. The partition of the sub-continent did not coincide with the transboundary river systems in the region but was based on religious parameters. The lack of trust, confidence and political acrimony marking the partition of India, Pakistan and then the creation of Bangladesh still resonates in resource disputes.

The China Factor

China and Tibet in particular are key factors in the water dynamics of the region. This is simply due to the fact that many of the rivers and their basins in the region originate from the Tibetan plateau, making it the uppermost riparian country. Enmeshed between China and other South Asian countries, India becomes a middle riparian power.

It is obvious that China's geographical position as an upper riparian state gives it a strategic leverage having implications for the rest of the region. Therefore, there are anxieties amongst the lower riparians over the Chinese advantage on these resources. China's thirst for water resources is due to its huge population and water scarcity in parts of the country. The concern over China's alleged ambitious plans to harness and utilise waters originating from its territory generates anxiety in the lower riparian states. They fear the impact on their own supplies and environment. This is worsened by the lack of transparency, interactions and discussion, amid mutual misperceptions and suspicions.

The Way Ahead

Disputes over water will only aggravate in the future considering that there are enough drivers pushing the region closer towards the brink of a serious water stress conflict. The way ahead would require the region to minimise and control the clear risks arising from the disputes.

Firstly, the spirit of sharing of these transboundary rivers has to be fostered, considering the growing water scarcity, growing demands and the compelling need for interdependence. Countries in the subcontinent including China have their respective developmental needs to take care of. This can be done best if there is camaraderie and understanding amongst them. It is critical to depoliticise water as an issue, bring all these countries to the table and increase dialogue and transparency amongst them.

Secondly, it is important for these countries to develop their own efficient water management systems as well as learn best practices from others to minimise wastage and ensure conservation. Bilateral, regional and multilateral cooperation and coordination are essential. Regional mechanisms like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could be effectively used for this purpose. South Asian countries also have to involve China in all these efforts considering that it is increasingly a critical actor in regional water disputes.

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