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Understanding the Nature of the India-China Security Dilemma: Hydropolitics in the Brahmaputra

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Introduction

India-China relations have come under growing strain in the recent decades. This can be attributed to varying causes: their military standoff across the disputed border, rivalry for influence in the region, and China's increasingly belligerent and unconstrained behaviour are among some reasons (Jyoti Deka, 2021). However, this paper shall focus specifically on Indo-China hydro-politics and their point of contention as riparian states over the Brahmaputra /Yarlung Zangbo River, which seems to have taken on the form of a security dilemma. The competition exhibited by the two states over the water body occupies a unique position as the transboundary river flows through the controversially claimed territory of Arunachal Pradesh (controversially claimed by China) in India as well as Southern Tibet in China. This is a major river basin that has no formal water agreement, and of course, its tensions branch off in to fears of water scarcity, environmental problems, and national security. The damming of the Brahmaputra began in 2010, with its most recent plans being People's Republic of China's adoption of the 14th Five-Year Plan on March 2021, including the building of hydropower stations within Tibet Autonomous Region. (Saikia, 2022). To which authorities in India are afraid that Chinese hydropower projects might cause flash floods or lead to a water shortage (Arora & Devjyot, 2020). Specific events such as the fear or occurrence of an upstream capture of a river basin may also cause a security dilemma, as it will be considered a hostile act by downstream states (Warner, 2012). As explained by Robert Jervis, these attempts by a state to increase its own security, such as the People's Republic of China attempting to resolve its water scarcity, may exacerbate the rivalry and political tensions of the countries involved (Glaser, 1997). In reference to these theories of how the construction of dams upon major rivers may create a security dilemma, this paper wishes to explore the question "How does Indo-China

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hydro-politic¹s over Brahmaputra/Yarlung Zangbo contribute to a security dilemma?”. In doing so, how the scarcity dilemma of water may take on the tones of a security dilemma reflecting on the fears of India and China will be explored through the aid of the Brahma-hypothesis.

Literature Review

In Bhaskar Jyoti Deka’s (2021) paper, the term “Brahma-hypothesis” is used to signify India’s fear of China’s hydropower activities and their implications. India’s accusations of China establishing a hydrohegemony are contradicted by the lack of domestic support of protests in the NER. However, both countries have expressed their concerns over each other’s hydropower activities in Arunachal Pradesh, and see the river as a key to controlling the disputed area. According to (Samaranayake et al., 2018), in dealing with tensions over the river China has shown little willingness to address Brahmaputra issues at a multilateral level, although there may be potential for China to modestly increase collaboration at both a bilateral and international level, China has not demonstrated much inclination to solve Brahmaputra concerns at the multilateral level. Even though India perceives itself as a victim of China's water operations, it nonetheless aims to maximize national water resources without taking its own downstream neighbors' negative effects into adequate consideration or mitigating them. Furthermore, difficulties for Sino-Indian relations extends beyond fears of flooding and water diversion, it includes a way of either country country establishing its territorial dominance and sovereignty over the disputed territory of Arunachal Pradesh or Southern Tibet, as well as use these facilities to obstruct water flow in a future Sino-Indian confrontation.

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In order to comprehend the circumstances the two states are enmeshed in, as well as to what extent their hydrogeopolitics fit under the security dilemma and its exact nature. Both Tripathi (2011) and Warner (2012) argue that the security dilemma induced by water bodies are created through a “fear of scarcity” making a “scarcity dilemma” interconnect and take on the tones of a security dilemma that intensifies competition over water that may take place in the form of a “vicious cycle”. This paper uses the case of the Brahmaputra/Yarlung Zangbo to highlight the fact that although the fear of scarcity may play a role in the security dilemma between India and China, the issue is much more nuanced and may possess elements that extend beyond those of Warner (2012) and Tripathi’s (2011) explanations for water induced security dilemmas.

Data Analysis

In order to analyse Indo-China hydrogeopolitics over securing the Brahmaputra, Bhaskar Jyoti Deka, (2021) brings in the concept of Brahma-hypothesis, on India’s fears about the effects of China’s dam construction. This can be further elaborated through the three components of the hypothesis: first, there is the Indian concern that if China builds major dams and implements water diversion projects upstream, the waters of the Brahmaputra would be lost. Second, there is the fear of being destroyed by floods brought on by the rupture of such dams upstream. Thirdly, if China unilaterally appropriates its waterways, there is concern that Chinese actions upstream would have an impact on Bangladesh's and Assam's floodplains. The creation of such a hypothesis has been influenced by the rising water needs as well as China's choices, at least theoretically, to build infrastructure

for water storage and water diversion projects from the Brahmaputra to the arid Xinjiang area (Jyoti Deka, 2021).

Bhaskar Jyoti Deka's final statement on the issue highlights that the lack of a formal agreement or treaty as well as the knowledge gap and lack of cooperation could have dire results on the people of India's North Eastern Region (NER). This lack of cooperation is witnessed on both sides with China being unpredictable and uncertain with a history of water diversion projects that have led to "environmental mistrust", while India itself has failed to take any measures in highlighting the Brahmaputra situation as a national security threat, resulting in the people of NER of India being caught between a rock and a hard place with growing concerns over future implications.

In a more theoretical perspective, Chinese and Indian behaviour may be further understood through the theoretical lens of the security dilemma (Warner, 2012). The upstream capture of water as exhibited by China may be interpreted as a hostile act by downstream states, regardless of the action being of peaceful motives. Claims of its benefits by the upstreamer will be overlooked as, downstream states will later pin the blame of unfortunate phenomena such as unexpected floods. In 2017 China's failure to provide hydrological data due to "mysterious reasons" and the unexpected release of water caused sudden and devastating floods that uprooted 50,000 people in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in India. Jeroen Warner further explains that this sort of event is often followed by the downstream party taking action to further prevent the upstream state in gaining further hydraulic leverage; in this case which is the Assam region protesting China's future dam construction on the Brahmaputra. This "fear of scarcity" as explained by the Brahma-hypothesis is further reflected through a scarcity dilemma, doubled as a security dilemma (Tripathi, 2011). However, one way in which it deviates from Warner's argument, is the fact that

India's "threat-defense sequences" are not set off by these activities. Interactions of high political echelons with China have shown no such responses, and have only revealed India as a reluctant negotiator that often overlooks domestic concerns over the Brahmaputra (Jyoti Deka, 2021).

Tripathi (2011) offers a similar perspective that explains the Brahma-hypothesis and Indo-China behavior through scarcity dilemma being one side of the same coin and interconnected as the security dilemma caused by transboundary river disputes. The scarcity dilemma in water issues occurs when a decision-maker, here being China, is faced with options that have less-than-ideal consequences; for example, attempts to address a water shortage in the North by building dams or implementing inter-basin transfers result in scarcity in other locations like the Arunachal Pradesh. For instance, India, as a lower riparian country can view China's efforts to extract water from the Brahmaputra as dangerous because they believe it would lead to shortages on their territory. It is necessary to compare and contrast the security issue with the scarcity dilemma. In international politics, John Herz created the phrase "security dilemma" to characterize a scenario in which governments engage in competitive armament as a reaction to one another's ambiguous intentions. Due to this, states find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle that is impossible to escape (Tripathi, 2011).

But how does Indo-China relations fit in to this vicious cycle: that of a state increasing its security causing a rival state to increase its own out of fear or competition and vice versa. First, it is important to establish what the parties are afraid of and why. India's fear of China's damming of the Brahmaputra goes beyond the Brahma-hypothesis of flooding and water diversion, it includes a way of establishing its territorial dominance and sovereignty over the disputed territory of Arunachal Pradesh (Samaranayake et al., 2018). Perhaps India's aforementioned reluctance in

supporting domestic protests may be further explained as its concern stems less from the river's waters itself than from the goal of securing India's rights to the area through which the trans-boundary Brahmaputra flows. Given the disputed region through which the river runs and China's international attempts to contest India's rights to the land, India uses the river to seek consolidation of the territory. In doing so, Warner's statement on upstream captures leading to a security dilemma, cannot be applied alone to the case of the Brahmaputra. It is instead a part of a series of actions that form the cycle of a territory induced security dilemma between the two states.

Conclusion

Although the Brahma-hypothesis highlights the fear of scarcity and environmental concerns, India's fears are more in line with its overall relationship with China, and how it may use the river to increase its own security and leverage over China; territorially and environmentally (flooding and soil erosion) (Samaranayake et al., 2018). Although the people of NER, additionally fear water diversions. While China's fear seems to be more in line with fears of scarcity and territorial claims. Overall the nature of the security dilemma that has a hold of China and India revolve around using the Brahmaputra as a foothold on disputed territory rather than scarcity for the time being. But this does not negate the possibility of a future scarcity dilemma caused by their rising populations and strain on resources.

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