

## **Modi's visit to China: Will it break the ice on vexed transboundary water sharing framework?**

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India, China and Bangladesh share prime transboundary river systems including Brahmaputra in South Asia without any water sharing mechanism. The rapid rise in population coupled with agriculture, urbanization and industrialization has stimulated the demand for the precious natural resource. The per capita water availability has dipped sharply in the last few decades.

The current visit by Indian PM of China is an opportune moment to initiate the long awaited process to move forward for a water sharing framework between major riparian nations China, India and Bangladesh for optimally exploiting the transboundary water resources. So far only limited data sharing process is in vogue between China and India as appreciated in the joint statements released by the Government of India during the visits of Xi Jinping in 2014 and Le Keqiang in 2013.

The Indian side expressed appreciation to China for providing flood-season hydrological data and the assistance in emergency management. The two sides will further strengthen cooperation through the Expert-Level Mechanism on the provision of flood-season hydrological data and emergency management, and exchange views on other issues of mutual interest.

Along with data sharing the joint statements also highlighted the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) Economic Corridor which opens the window of cooperation in areas other than water as well.

For transboundary river water sharing, what can be the way forward at this juncture? Continue with the present scenario and unilaterally manage the transboundary rivers, or to initiate the process for an ultimate joint water sharing framework culminating in optimal mutual benefits.

Joint water sharing approach is imperative, to counter in unison growing climate change effects, glacier melt, snow cover loss and erratic hydrological behavior like cloud bursts impacting China, India and Bangladesh. It is now the collective responsibility of the major riparian countries to conserve and manage the huge freshwater reserves in the third pole for posterity.

Floods and droughts are a chronic problem in India and Bangladesh in the Brahmaputra basin. The changing monsoon (shorter spells of heavy to very heavy downpour) coupled with rapid glacier melt and reduced snow cover could lead to more severe floods in the region. The next few decades could witness huge runoff, but by the mid of this century bulk of the freshwater resources may be exhausted due to the lack of coordinated efforts to conserve the transboundary water.

Joint development and management of water resources is the only way out. Development of safely designed water infrastructures including storage structures can solve the problem of floods and droughts in the region besides multilateral benefits.

Lack of sustained proactive diplomatic effort to better manage the transboundary water is responsible for postponing the initiation on joint water sharing mechanism. The way forward could be through focused diplomatic policy to take up readily acceptable issues with common meeting ground in a step by step forward movement towards vexed ones.

To start with, it may be pragmatic to diplomatically and technically identify areas of possible agreement. The working hypothesis in this regard can be to expedite a preliminary exercise on:

1. how joint expertise of the Big Giants can be mobilized to curb glacier melting in the Himalayas;
2. how enormous hydel potential in the upstream reaches including the great bend around Namche Barwa could be harnessed (possibly with low height cascading dams in series) with minimum detriment to environment and ecology of the region; and
3. how devastating floods in India and Bangladesh could be moderated with joint technical support and cooperation.

Hopefully the present visit of the Indian Prime Minister to China may break the ice for initializing the process for a water sharing framework. There are high expectations that the visit of Mr. Narendra Modi to China could lay the ground work for the long-postponed transboundary water sharing mechanism for the sake of poverty alleviation involving about 2 billion impoverished populace of the Asian region.

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