

# Cooperation in the Brahmaputra River

## *Managing Perceptions and Prospects.....*

China and India are upper and middle riparians, respectively of the Brahmaputra River. Presently, however, there are few robust mechanisms for riparian cooperation between China and India. Cooperation consists primarily of a series of memoranda of understanding (MOUs) on hydrological data-sharing and an expert-level mechanism established in 2006 (Table 1) which provide information about water level, discharge and rainfall. But these MOUs are non-binding and there is no oversight body that can ensure implementation. The low level of institutionalized riparian cooperation between China and India is a challenge for the management of Brahmaputra River. Without any water-sharing agreement, a joint river commission and dispute settlement mechanisms, there are limited avenues to prevent and resolve water conflicts.

Table 1.: Existing Sino-Indian Cooperation on Transboundary River

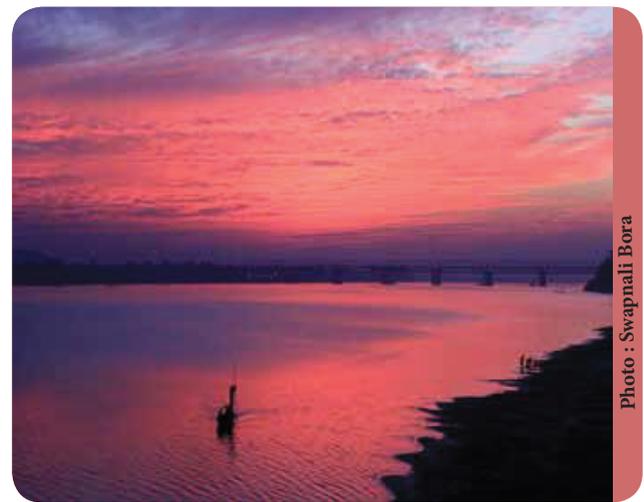
Date	Frameworks	Details
2002, renewed in 2008 and 2013	MOU on Hydrological Data Sharing on the Brahmaputra River Brahmaputra/Yalu Zangbu	China agreed in a MOU signed in 2002 to provide hydrological information, namely water level, discharge, and rainfall, from 1 June to 15 October every year. The 2002 MOU expired in 2007 and was renewed in 2008 for another five years. In 2013, the MOU was further extended till 2018. In October 2013, a new MOU on Strengthening Cooperation on Transboundary Rivers was signed. China agreed to share data from 1 May instead of 1 June. Under the MOU, China and India also agreed to "exchange views on other areas of mutual interest."
2005, renewed in 2010	MOU on Hydrological Data Sharing on River Sutlej/LangquinZangbu	China agreed to provide hydrological information during flood season. An Implementation Plan was additionally signed in 2011 for China to provide hydrological information, data transmission method, and cost settlement.
2006	Expert-level Mechanism	The expert group made up of representatives from both sides discusses interaction and cooperation on provision of flood season by hydrological data, emergency management, and other issues on an annual basis. The first meeting was held in 2007, and meetings were held every year subsequently.

Water politics between China and India are conflated with larger historical, political, and territorial issues. Two misperceptions, a lack of trust, and security dilemmas between the two sides prevented the emergence of robust institutions to manage their transboundary water relations. However, despite these tensions difficulties in building institutional capacity for managing their transboundary waters, both the governments have managed to keep their differences on managing the Brahmaputra from breaking into open conflict. The chief strategy they have relied on is to desecuritize water as an issue between them by relying on inclusive rhetoric to minimize hot issues and control the escalation of misperceptions. The narrative both sides have employed is to focus on reassurances to safeguard interest of each other.

By sharing hydrological data with India, China seeks to assuage Indian concerns about the floods in northeast India. When news of the construction of the Zangmu Dam broke in India in 2010, Chinese

officials and hydropower companies assured the Indian side that the dam will not stop the flow of the river downstream, that it is not a project to divert the waters of the Brahmaputra, and that it will not affect the welfare of populations in the downstream areas.

On its part, the Indian government has tried to manage domestic perceptions of Chinese upstream activities. Top Indian leaders consistently and repeatedly raised transborder rivers as an issue of concern to Chinese leaders. They have repeated assurances from the China that they have no intention of diverting the waters of the Brahmaputra and any act that would adversely impact India's interest. Such official discourses are aimed at desecuritizing water as an issue with China so as to prevent relations from being derailed by water issues.



These efforts on the part of the both the governments have helped prevent tensions on the Brahmaputra river, however, more can be done to enhance cooperation between the two sides. While water-sharing agreements and joint development are difficult at this stage, both sides could nevertheless upgrade their current MOU-based cooperation to a higher level of institutionalization. A greater level of institutionalized cooperation will provide forums for negotiations and lower transaction costs, thus ensuring greater stability in their relations. Both sides could enhance mutual exchanges in disaster management. For instance, it was reported in June 2016 that flood-prone Assam has set up a team of experts tasked with going to China to study its Yellow River flood management techniques. Apart from hydrological information-sharing for flood control, both sides could move on to the next stage to exchange information on water pollution control and environmental protection. Such exchanges will enhance cooperation and help build confidence on both sides. In addition, both India and China are interested in sustainable economic development, which could serve as a platform for engendering cooperation. They could collaborate on research into the impact of climate change on the Himalayan glaciers. This can be built on top of the MOU to cooperate on climate change issues that was signed between the two sides in 2009. Such cooperation could be further extended and given greater substance by bringing in expertise from both sides.

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