

# Understanding China's Transboundary Water Policies

## Major Gaps.....

While the developed countries have largely been able to successfully manage their shared waters, transboundary water management is still very problematic in the developing world, especially in Asia, which is home to over 60% of the global population and many of the most water-stressed countries. As far as transboundary water management in Asia is concerned, China's role is vital. Sharing 112 international rivers and lakes along its southwest, northwest, and northeast borders and being home to most of Asia's great rivers that flow into 18 downstream countries. China is the most important upstream country for transboundary water and ecological security in Asia. This geographic reality makes the transboundary water resources and corresponding environmental issues key components of China's international and regional relations.

Despite the critical importance of China in managing transboundary water conflicts in Asia, China's policy and practices towards issues related to the shared waters has been inadequately researched and thus understood. Most of the academic papers and journalist articles tend to most of the academic follow the realist approach to examine China's practices towards the Transboundary Rivers, and unanimously argued describe China as a malevolent hydro-hegemon. While the existing research has significantly enriched our understanding of the transboundary water issues both in general and the Chinese context, there are still several significant research gaps which deserve further studies.

First, the most common problem in the limited studies which conceptualize China's approaches to transboundary water issues tends to neglect the uniqueness of each river basin or river. Without fully comprehending the key differences of each river basin, cross-comparison of China's behaviors at each river basin could easily generate faulty conclusions. In the Chinese context, transboundary rivers can broadly be divided into two groups. One group includes cross-border rivers with China at the upstream. Nujiang-Salween River, Yarlung Zangbo-Brahmaputra River, Yuanjiang-Red River Ganges River, Indus River, Lancangjiang-Mekong River and Irtysh River belong to this group. The other group consists of border rivers, cross-border rivers with China at downstream and mixed rivers. Most of the transboundary rivers in the Northeast region are either border rivers or mixed rivers, including most notably Amur, Yalu, Tumen River. Although in most cases, China is located at the upstream, there are a few rivers where China is at the downstream. For instance, China is at the downstream of the Kherlen River, which is originated from Mongolia. The Ili River is a much more complicated case. The biggest source of Ili river-Tekesi River is originated from Kazakhstan and another important tributary of Ili River is Khorgos river which serves as the 150 km border between China and Kazakhstan. These groupings will be helpful in analyzing the degree of vulnerability from China's more vulnerable when it is located at the downstream of a particular transboundary river and over a border. This does not only due to water-related issues but also because changes in the river course will affect national sovereignty. And the likelihood of conflicts between China and neighboring countries will be affected by four key factors, including the degree of water scarcity (including other importance aspects of water), the extent to which water supply is shared by more than one region or state, the relative power of the basin states, the ease of access to alternative fresh water resources.

Second, another major problem in the majority of the transboundary water management studies has been the often implicit assumption that the state is the sole or primary actor in international relations. Earlier studies of transboundary water governance have focused on inter-state relationships, taking state actors as the key players in international waters affairs. While the critical role of the state in defining formal governance structures and even informal interaction in transboundary

water issues should not be overlooked, the emphasis of the state's role is nonetheless inefficient. Similarly, in the case of China, scholars and security analysts who have taken notice of the critical role of China in transboundary water management issues in Asia often treat China as a unitary actor and describe everything that China has undertaken in its relations with the region as part of China's strategic calculation. However, transboundary water governance should not be monopolized by state actors, but rather include aspirations and opinions of non-state actors living in the basin.



Photo : Swapnali Bora

At national level, the transboundary water management is highly fragmented, hence, there is not a single lead agency responsible for all the issues relating to China's transboundary water. Sub-national governments could be of equal importance to central government bureaucracies, particularly in the field of water resource management and overall interactions with neighboring countries. Apart from state actors, the role of other players, such as dam builders, NGOs, and scholars should not be neglected as well. The subnational actors, such as the local government, NGOs, state-owned enterprises, can influence the country's practices at the transboundary water management from three major aspects: 1) the degree of utilization of transboundary rivers, 2) China's overall relationship with neighbouring countries, and 3) the implementation of central government's policy.

Third, previous studies on China's approach towards the transboundary water issues has been framed within the conflict-cooperation spectrum, focusing mainly on the central government's willingness and practices in formulation of an international agreements or treaties. The separation of conflicts on the one end of the spectrum and cooperation on the other end means that "the less ugly faces of conflict and less pretty faces of cooperation are overlooked". In addition, the existence of an international water agreement is also a poor indicator of the status of cooperation between two countries over shared water resources. Even when international water agreements are signed, it does not mean contracting states are actually cooperating and the lack of agreement does not mean riparian states are fighting. In other words, the presence of a treaty does not automatically translate into behavioral altering cooperation. Therefore, a more robust and nuanced understanding is required for analysis and for policy making to reflect the multifaceted reality of transboundary water conflict and cooperation in China. Even more importantly, it is necessary to highlight that cooperation in and of itself is not the desired end for third-world riparian governments, as for China and its neighbours; rather, cooperation need to be perceived as the basis for proceeding with the development of water resources encompassed by basins. Accordingly, the mere existence or depth of water agreements is a poor indicator of the degree of water interactions between two China and neighboring countries which, instead, needs to be measured against the larger economic ties between countries at a particular river basin.

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