Issue Brief
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Chinese Water Projects in Tibet: A "Continental Challenge"

Antonina Luszczykiewicz-Mendis

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The management of transboundary water resources originating in Tibet has become a critical geopolitical and geo-economic issue in Asia. This issue brief examines China's hydrological projects on the Tibetan Plateau and their implications for downstream countries. By exploring two key pillars of China's water strategy—the construction of mega-dams and the South-North Water Diversion Project—the issue brief discusses both the domestic and international consequences of Beijing's initiatives, such as environmental degradation, displacement of local populations, and the potential for Beijing to weaponize water as a geopolitical tool. In particular, it focuses on tensions between China and India, the involvement of Tibetan expatriate leadership, and the role of the U.S.-China rivalry.

Introduction

In early January 2021, barely a couple of weeks before President Donald Trump's first term came to an end, the White House declassified the "U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific."[1] The document identified two "continental challenges" in Asia. While some might have expected these challenges to include a potential crisis in the Taiwan Strait or the North Korean nuclear threat, the U.S. government appeared to be more concerned about the very heart of Asia: the Tibetan Plateau. According to the document, the two "continental challenges" of the 21st century encompass India's border dispute with its communist neighbor as well as access to water, "including the Brahmaputra and other rivers facing diversion by China."[2]

At first glance Tibet might seem to be nothing more than just a cold, rocky, and largely uninhabitable landmass. However, it is actually one of the world's primary sources of freshwater. As the third largest area of frozen water after the North and South Poles, it has metaphorically been referred to as the "Third

Pole."[3] Tibetan glaciers, lakes, and rivers serve as a lifeline to nearly half of the global population across East, South, and Southeast Asia.

The most important rivers originating in the Tibetan Plateau, which provide freshwater for human consumption, agriculture, and farming activity, as well as a wide range of diverse ecosystems, include:

a) the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers in China;

b) the Indus and Brahmaputra,[4] which are vital to India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh; and,

c) the Irrawaddy and Mekong, flowing through Southeast Asia.

From a geopolitical and geo-economic perspective, the control of these valuable freshwater resources has been in the hands of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which annexed Tibet in 1950 during the so-called "peaceful liberation." By controlling the sources of transboundary rivers and expanding a vast network of river dams, China has increasingly been able to store and divert water, thereby affecting downstream countries. In this light, labelling river diversion schemes in Tibet as a "continental challenge" suggests that the White House recognizes and understands the gravity of China's geo-hydrological leverage over the countries of South and Southeast Asia. The question is, however, whether—and under what circumstances—Beijing might be willing to play its power "water card"[5] against the lower riparian states.

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The Two Pillars of China's Hydrological Projects in Tibet

By taking over the Tibetan "water tower,"[6] the PRC not only gained access to vast freshwater resources, but has also been able to erect river dams to generate electric energy. To date, the Three Gorges Dam on Yangtze River, the world's largest hydropower station in terms of installed capacity, remains China's most monumental project. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Beijing has made hydropower its main source of renewable energy.[7] With the highest number of dams in the world,[8] China plans to achieve carbon-neutrality by 2060.[9]

In December 2024, Beijing announced plans to build the largest hydropower dam in the world. With a capacity to generate three times more energy than the Three Gorges Dam, the new dam will be located on the transboundary Brahmaputra River (known as the Yarlung Tsangpo River in Tibet). Despite China's assurances regarding safety and ecological protection, the project has already generated significant controversy—particularly in India, where, due to engineering challenges, it has been labeled the "world's riskiest project."[10]

In addition to river dams, Chinese water schemes include the South-North Water Diversion Project—the largest water management project in human history. Its goal is to address China's regional water imbalance. Through the construction of a system of canals, tunnels, and reservoirs, Chinese authorities have been diverting water from the water-rich south to the drier areas in the north, including the nation's capital. The project is divided into three main routes, two of which are already operational; the third one, still in a planning phase, may potentially involve the transboundary Brahmaputra River.

Although designed as a remedy for China's internal challenges—such as combating water scarcity as well supporting agricultural and industrial endeavors—the project could have adverse effects on downstream countries: India and Bangladesh. This raises a critical question: would such consequences merely be an unintended "side effect" of Beijing's efforts to resolve domestic issues, or might the Chinese authorities deliberately weaponize water as a tool against the lower riparian states?

Domestic and International Consequences of China's Hydrological Projects

While hydroelectricity is generally considered a form of renewable energy, the construction and operation of dams have generated significant controversy.

First, building river dams and artificial reservoirs results in an irreversible modification of natural landscapes. Such extensive interference can even increase the risk of earthquakes.[11] Moreover, the creation of reservoirs with much larger surface areas than rivers leads to excessive water evaporation.[12]

Second, hydropower plants are not always reliable for energy generation—especially during droughts. For instance, in the summer of 2022 in China, low water levels in rivers rendered dams unable to produce sufficient energy. Consequently, power cuts significantly disrupted the food industry and factory production.[13]

Third, large-scale hydrological projects often necessitate the relocation of local populations. In Tibet, relocation schemes—combined with the destruction of historical and religiously significant sites—have frequently provoked protests. On one hand, Chinese authorities have faced accusations of arresting Tibetan protesters and enforcing relocations,[14] which have further impoverished "dam migrants."[15] On the other hand, Beijing has asserted that relocated families are provided with better opportunities, including higher income, improved healthcare, and enhanced educational prospects for their children.[16]

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Despite these controversies, China has continued to expand its river dam system, affecting both its own local population and downstream countries. The latter have been concerned that Beijing may manipulate water levels on transboundary rivers by either releasing excessive amounts of water (causing floods beyond China's borders) or "turning off" the taps to increase water scarcity downstream.[17] Above all, it is important to emphasize that water challenges in the Himalayan region are not solely the result of global climate change, the development of water infrastructure, or the generation of electricity for domestic use—they are also intertwined with geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics involving China, the lower riparian states, and global powers such as the United States.

Tibetan Water Resources in U.S.-China Rivalry

For many years, the U.S. government has been closely monitoring China's hydrological projects in Tibet. During the World Water Week in 2023, U.S. Under Secretary Uzra Zeya stated that the "dramatically increased large-scale water diversion

projects and hydropower development across the Tibetan Plateau"[18] have been implemented without any input from the Tibetan population, resulting in the displacement of traditional mountainous communities. She further argued that the "reduced access to fresh water for a region of 1.8 billion people will have drastic environmental, economic, and societal consequences"[19] across all states situated along the transboundary rivers originating in Tibet.

Such remarks—particularly when made by high-level U.S. officials—often elicit a strong response from Chinese authorities. Zeya's comments were promptly addressed by the *Global Times*—an English-language platform affiliated with the *People's Daily*, the flagship newspaper of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In a lengthy article, the *Global Times* not only defended Beijing's actions, but also accused the U.S. State Department of colluding with "the Dalai Lama clique" to "attack and smear China's water resources development and utilization" on the Tibetan Plateau.[20] The platform concluded that the "rhetoric of the West and the Dalai Lama clique is completely unscientific and fabricated."[21]

The fierce criticism from the Chinese platform was tied not only to Zeya's remarks during the 2023 water-related conference but also to her position within the U.S. government. In July 2021, Zeya was appointed Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. Concurrently, she has served as the United States Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues since December 2021.[22] The PRC condemned Zeya's appointment, claiming that contacts between Beijing and the Dalai Lama are not "U.S.' business," and that China "will not allow the U.S. to play any role in the dialogues."[23] The creation of the position of Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues in 1997 was itself viewed by Beijing as "a move of political manipulation, meant to interfere in China's internal affairs and undermine Tibet's development and stability."[24] Consequently, Beijing has never recognized the position.

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The Dalai Lama's Water Agenda

Having left Tibet in the aftermath of the failed uprising against Chinese authorities in 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama—born Tenzin Gyatso—has resided in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh ever since. The Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala—known unofficially as the Tibetan Government in Exile—has not been recognized by any state as the sole legal government of Tibet. Nonetheless, the Dalai Lama has been widely perceived as both a spiritual and political leader of Tibetans.

The Dalai Lama has officially endorsed the "Middle-Way Approach." According to this position, the current situation of Tibet and Tibetans under the People's Republic of China is unacceptable; at the same time, however, it does not call for Tibet's independence.[25] Acknowledging that Tibet was officially granted an autonomous status by Beijing in 1965, the Dalai Lama has advocated for leaving all internal matters of Tibet in the hands of its local community. Consequently, he has argued that environmental issues—including water resource management—should be overseen by Tibetans as "Tibetans know Tibet better."[26] To achieve this, however, he has emphasized that Tibetans "need full autonomy."[27]

Although environmental matters have become an important part of the Dalai Lama's agenda, he has repeatedly stressed that his ecological activism is devoid of political motives. In an article published by the *Time* in 2020, the Tibetan spiritual leader declared that he is "fully committed" to Tibet's ecology and culture, even though he "retired" from a political involvement.[28] Similarly, at The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies in 2009, the Dalai Lama urged that China's grand infrastructural projects should be "unbiased,"[29] carried out "with no other interest. No political interest."[30]

Nonetheless, the Dalai Lama has, in fact, linked China's neglect of environmental matters to its political system in various comments and interviews. During a speech at the Endangered Tibet Conference in Australia in 1996, he blamed communist ideology for disregarding environmental protection. The Tibetan leader argued that in former communist countries, "(…) there were many pollution problems in the past resulting from carelessness, simply because factories are growing bigger and production is rising with little regard to the damage this growth causes to the environment."[31] According to the Dalai Lama, this was also the case for decades in the PRC, reflecting the "ignorance" inherent in its political system.[32]

As the head of the Tibetan Government in Exile, the Dalai Lama has repeatedly emphasized that, with their historical and geographical knowledge and experience, the people of Tibet should be in charge of the Tibetan natural resources; hence, "full" autonomy of the region is a prerequisite. The Tibetan leader has also highlighted the international significance of the water issue, stating that "this is not only for the interest of 6 million Tibetans but all people in this region."[33] In this way, the Dalai Lama appears to have used the environmental narrative, focused on ecological protection, as a means to raise the issue of Tibetan autonomy on the international stage.

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These attempts to wrap the political agenda in ecological discourse, however, have not been well-received by the Chinese authorities. Due to the political, historical, and ideological context of Tibet's status, the control and management of its water resources is a particularly sensitive issue for Beijing. As a result, any form of external criticism regarding China's hydrological projects in Tibet—especially when articulated by Washington—is seen as an attempt to interfere in China's internal affairs.

India's Water Issue with China

Relations between China and India has been troubled and tense, particularly following the deadly 2020 Galwan Valley clash between Chinese and Indian troops in the Himalayas.[34] These tensions have made it highly challenging for Beijing and New Delhi to cooperate, be transparent, and trust each other in terms of water-sharing.

First, the China-India water issue is intertwined with the 75-year-long border dispute. This conflict is strongly connected to the two countries' post-colonial trauma and their need to defend territorial integrity. On top of that, one of the disputed regions—the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh—has been claimed by China as the southernmost tip of Tibet. As the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama,

the area holds significant importance in the battle for the hearts and minds of the Tibetan population.

Second, there is no water-sharing treaty between China and India regarding their transboundary rivers. The only existing agreement is a memorandum of understanding on sharing water data for the Brahmaputra River.[35] However, in September 2017, China failed to warn India about an impending flood on Brahmaputra, thereby violating the agreement. This incident, coupled with an unexplained contamination of the Siang River in the Indian state of Assam in December of the same year, has led some experts to believe that these episodes may have been acts of retaliation by China for the Doklam standoff which involved Chinese and Indian troops in the Himalayas just a few months earlier.[36]

Third, Indian authorities have expressed concerns over China's construction of dams on the Brahmaputra River. Any alteration to the river's flow could potentially have severe implications for India's water security, particularly in the water-scarce northern regions. In response, New Delhi has accelerated its own dam projects in the disputed region of Arunachal Pradesh.[37] A senior Indian government official stated that "India too needs its counter-contingency plans on a mission mode" to secure its water resources.[38] However, by pursuing infrastructure development in the disputed area, New Delhi has been risking escalating tensions with Beijing.

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China's Water Strategy: Possible Scenarios for the Future

There is growing concern about China's plans and intentions regarding water-sharing practices among the countries of both South and Southeast Asia. For South Asian states, the biggest threat—in addition to the development of a dam system—is a potential diversion of water from the Brahmaputra River if the third phase of China's South-North Water Diversion Project is launched. For Southeast Asia, the main concern appears to be the normalization of incidents involving lowering of water level on the Mekong River through dam operations. Such maneuvers have already occurred—for example, in early 2021, China reduced the water flow on the Mekong River by 50 percent without prior warning. This led to a one-meter drop in water level which significantly disrupted fishing, farming, and transportation across Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.[39]

China may potentially weaponize water against the lower riparian states through water diversion schemes and manipulation of water level via its vast network or river dams. This could have a significant impact on the economies of downstream countries, undermining their social and political stability. Such actions may lead to inter-state animosities—for example, between India and Bangladesh or among Southeast Asian nations that share the same water resources. Additionally, it could also trigger internal conflicts, such as disputes

between Indian states and regions competing for limited water resources.

The perceived threat from China regarding water-sharing practices has already driven lower riparian countries to increase investments in hydrological infrastructure, including river dams and artificial reservoirs. However, such actions could provoke China, especially if they involve investments from its rivals, such as the United States. A notable example is the USAID-sponsored Mekong Water Data Initiative (MWDI), which seeks to improve the transboundary management of the Mekong River through data sharing and science-based decision making.[40] A vicious circle is thus created, where the perceived threat from China prompts other countries to counterbalance its potential actions, leading to further escalation of Beijing's coercive measures.

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However, it is important to emphasize that China is not inevitably destined to weaponize water against downstream countries. Much seems to actually depend on the political climate. A good exemplification is the dynamics of China-India relations—while their current relationship is at a low point following the Galwan Valley clash, back in 2006, China and India reopened the Nathu La border crossing in Sikkim for cross-border trade. Furthermore, since 2015, Indian pilgrims visiting sacred sites in Tibet were permitted to use this route on organized tours.[41] This move implicitly suggested China's acceptance of the *status quo*, i.e., India's sovereignty over Sikkim.

Above all, it indicates that China is capable of compromise and positive gestures when the broader political atmosphere is conducive. It is worth noting that 2015 marked a period of warming relations between China and India, coinciding with the beginning of the Xi Jinping-Narendra Modi era. However, this peculiar second "China-India honeymoon" (following the cordial atmosphere in the mid-1950s) faced a major setback during the 2017 Doklam standoff, and came to an abrupt end with the 2020 Galwan Valley crisis. Reportedly, the Nathu La route for Indian pilgrims has remained closed since then.[42] While the closure was understandable at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, it now appears to carry more of a political message.

In the current political climate, it is difficult to anticipate a breakthrough. Tensions may escalate further in the future, particularly in the context of Tibet when the current Dalai Lama passes away. It is likely that while the Tibetan community will seek to identify the Dalai Lama's reincarnation—possibly among the Tibetan diaspora in India or elsewhere—the CPC will almost certainly put forward its own candidate as his successor. As the host of the largest Tibetan expatriate community, India may face significant challenges in managing its already strained relationship with China during this period. Such tensions could have a ripple effect, impacting various aspects of relations with Beijing, including water-sharing practices.

Conclusion

Due to its strategic geographical location, China is considered a water-privileged state—some even refer to it as a "hydro-hegemon."[43] A variety of issues have raised suspicions among South and Southeast Asian states about China's true intentions regarding water-sharing. These concerns include the lack of bilateral water agreements between China and its lower riparian neighbors, incidents of unannounced water manipulations on the Mekong River, and the withholding of critical water data from a downstream country despite an existing agreement, to name just a few examples.

At the same time, Beijing has categorically rejected accusations of human rights violations and environmental exploitation related to its hydrological projects on the Tibetan Plateau. Instead, China has framed such criticism as attempts at foreign interference in its internal affairs.[44] Additionally, Beijing has consistently refused to engage in any discussions involving the Dalai Lama or the Tibetan expatriate community. As a result, amid ongoing global climate change, lower riparian states now appear compelled to invest in their own water infrastructure and establish multilateral platforms for dialogue and cooperation—hoping for China to demonstrate goodwill and waiting for a more favorable political climate.

Author –

Dr. Antonina Luszczykiewicz-Mendis *is a former Fulbright Senior Scholar at Indiana University-Bloomington in the United States. Until February 2023, she served as the founding director of the "Taiwan Lab" research center at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. Specializing in the political and cultural history of China, India, and Sino-Indian relations, she has received international scholarships and grants to support her research from the Fulbright Program, the American–Polish Kosciuszko Foundation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (ROC), and the Confucius Institute Scholarship of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Antonina is currently an assistant professor at Jagiellonian University in Krakow. She also serves as a research fellow at the Central European Institute of Asian Studies in Bratislava, Slovakia, a non-resident fellow at the Taiwan Center for Security Studies at National Chengchi University in Taiwan, and an associate fellow of the World Academy of Art and Science.*

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