Transboundary water cooperation in South Asia: a case of Brahmaputra River Basin

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This policy brief discusses the conflicts and cooperation in the Brahmaputra river basin in South Asia (for details see Vij et al., 2019)1. It draws from the experiences of the Brahmaputra Dialogue, an informal dialogue process between the four riparian countries. The policy brief is divided into three sections. Section 1 elaborates the contextual background of the Brahmaputra river basin. Section 2 discusses the key challenges and opportunities that are shaping transboundary water conflicts and cooperation in the Brahmaputra river basin at the national (Bangladesh and India) and the transboundary level. Lastly, section 3 presents policy-relevant lessons from the Brahmaputra Dialogue for policy-makers working towards transboundary water cooperation.

1. Context

Originating from the Tibet Autonomous Region, the Brahmaputra river flows through India and ends in Bangladesh, covering a distance of 2840 Kilometers. 66 million people depend on the Brahmaputra River for their livelihood, with the highest concentration in floodplains. Many experts have suggested that a change in the river’s discharge will negatively impact dependent basin communities. Immerzeel (2010) and Gain and Wada (2014) expect an increase in intensity and frequency of seasonal water scarcity due to the hydrological impact of climate change and increasing population and development pressures. These predictions emphasize the potential benefit from improved cooperation between riparian states.

The river flows through a historically contested geography between the three riparian states (see Figure 1). The contestation is mostly related to border disputes and security issues, making the river securitized. Securitization is a process in which a riparian declares a particular issue related to the river to be an ‘existential threat’ to a state (McDonald, 2008). Due to the securitization of the Brahmaputra River in India, hydrological data sharing is limited between the countries. Here, no discharge and sediment size data are shared. Inadequate data sharing mechanisms in the Brahmaputra river does not promote basin level research to understand the geomorphology and other relevant insights on flooding and erosion issues (Ray et al., 2015).

1 The research was conducted as part of the PhD trajectory and for detailed analysis please refer to Vij, S., Warner, J. F., Biesbroek, R., & Groot, A. (2019). Non-decisions are also decisions: power interplay between Bangladesh and India over the Brahmaputra River. Water International, 1-21. Accessed at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02508060.2018.1554767
2. Research question and methodology

The focus of this research is to explain conflicts and cooperation in the Brahmaputra river basin and how the informal dialogue process is shaping interactions between riparian actors. The data was collected for all the Brahmaputra Dialogue (BD) meeting reports (between 2013-2018) and conducted closed-door interviews with the actors in both the countries involved in transboundary negotiations. An interpretive approach (Yanow, 1999) is used to systematically analyze the transboundary relationship between Bangladesh and India. A process of continuous meaning-making was developed by using both inductive and deductive ways of finding patterns and themes in the data collected.

3. Conflicts and cooperation in the Brahmaputra basin

a. Conflicts

In the Brahmaputra basin, collaborative processes are missing due to power struggles among basin actors that have made it difficult for basin actors to openly interact, share knowledge and learn. There are persistent power struggles between India, China and Bangladesh concerning the specific ways of controlling floods and tapping the potential of the Brahmaputra River (Vij et al., 2019). For instance, to reduce the impacts of flooding, the national government of India follows a technocratic approach (Bassett & Fogelman, 2013). India considers tangible adaptation measures such as storage structures and hydropower development to meet the growing energy demand and reduce climate-induced impacts such as floods. But if the upstream Brahmaputra is controlled and dammed as a result of adaptation measures in India, it will impact the livelihoods of millions in downstream India and Bangladesh. Further, the water conflicts between India and China relate to larger territorial and political issues (Ho, 2016). China’s plans to develop hydropower dams on the Brahmaputra River increase India’s suspicions of Chinese intentions (Yasuda et al., 2017). Both India and China are seen as unilateral in their actions, particularly in building dams, and are unforthcoming with sharing information.
Within India, the Brahmaputra River is shared by two federal states, Arunachal Pradesh (upstream) and Assam (downstream). The river enters India through Arunachal Pradesh from the Tibet Autonomous Region of China. The two states have different interests in the Brahmaputra. Assam is dependent on agriculture, fisheries, and hydropower benefits for rapidly agglomerating cities such as Guwahati (Joy et al., 2017). Arunachal Pradesh, with a smaller population, sees the potential to produce and sell hydropower to other states. Of the 63 hydroelectric schemes in the Brahmaputra basin, 42 are in Arunachal Pradesh (Rahaman & Varis, 2009). However, many Indian academics, environmentalists and civil society groups oppose the ongoing hydropower projects for issues such as submergence of large tracts of forest and agricultural lands, destruction of the river, and massive demographic changes. Baghel and Nusser (2010) argue that numerous hydropower projects in India defy major recommendations of the World Commission of Dams (2000). Such internal conflicts within India create hegemonic vulnerabilities, preventing the federal government from focusing on transboundary cooperation with other riparian states.

b. Cooperation

Opportunities for collaborative processes in the Brahmaputra basin can be found through informal channels such as the ‘Brahmaputra Dialogue’ (BD). The BD project is currently coordinated by the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati (India) to work towards a Brahmaputra basin level institutional framework. The BD project started as a bilateral dialogue platform between Bangladesh and India and eventually became a multilateral platform including all the riparian countries. The BD involves actors from track 3, 2 and 1.5 from countries in China, India, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The BD is the only continuous Track 1.5 dialogue initiative sharing various insights on the complexities of the Brahmaputra River.

The BD meetings are conducted at two levels: national level and regional level meetings. National level meetings were focused on discussing the country’s internal issues related to flooding, erosion, hydropower development and other institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution. The regional meetings emphasized issues such as hydrological data sharing, joint research at the basin level, technical discussions on inland navigation, basin-level erosion and flood control. The BD meetings provide riparians with opportunities to openly share interests and challenges with each other, but it was noted that India is reluctant to participate and indulge in such deliberations. Track 1.5 participation from India has remained weak in the BD regional meetings. India made unilateral decisions where, when and who should participate, without being questioned by weaker riparian countries. India uses its geographic position, military might and trade agreements to make decisions and influence Bangladesh in water-related discussions.

The BD meetings held between 2016-18 suggest that the dialogue process has been successful in building trust among riparian actors. Currently, the BD project specifically focuses on disaster risk reduction and inland navigation. A sustained dialogue (Brahmaputra Dialogue) might influence the Brahmaputra’s riparian countries to identify common interests related to water and could also encourage riparian countries to behave as basin leaders, thereby leading the way to cooperation. Actors in the Brahmaputra basin have been informally interacting through the Brahmaputra Dialogue, where navigation has emerged as a point of cooperation between Bangladesh and India.

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2 Diplomatic efforts by the concerned governments are called Track 1 diplomacy (Nishat & Faisal, 2000). Track 2 diplomacy refers ‘to a broad range of unofficial contacts and interaction aimed at resolving conflicts, both internationally and within states’ (Montville, 1991). Track 1.5 denotes senior bureaucrats of the concerned governments interacting to deliberate on an issue of concern.
The two countries have agreed to work together, identifying optimal routes for trade and reducing transport costs. As the Brahmaputra river flows in the north-eastern region (NER) of India, annual flash floods in the Brahmaputra river wash off roads and transport infrastructure. The river network systems, on the other hand, offer natural and centuries-old navigation channels connecting the north-eastern region. For instance, in Assam (India), where the Brahmaputra traverses the state across its length with multiple channels, inland water transport is the major means of conveyance for people. Such conveyance not only serves a large rural population in the state, it is also the sole mode to connect to the mainland for those living on the small alluvial formations in the mid channels, called chars. The National Waterways Act 2016, India declared 106 new waterways to be national waterways. Moreover, the national government is making investments and special emphasis to the 891 km national waterway of Brahmaputra from Dhubri to Sadiya (India) in the state of Assam (Vidyadharan and Nath, 2017).

4. Policy-relevant lessons

The following are policy-relevant lessons that policy-makers can use while dealing with transboundary water cooperation processes both in South Asia. They are interdependent and not in any priority of importance.

- Not all transboundary challenges can be resolved, leveraging commonalities such as in-land navigation and trade could support building trust and opening the communication channels in securitized river basins.
- More opportunities for informal interactions among riparian actors can improve participation and build trust among riparian states.
- Riparian states should be transparent about the costs and benefits that may accrue to member states and work on finding ways to equitably share the costs.
- Informal cooperation through Brahmaputra Dialogue could create positive opportunities for formal stakeholder (Track 1.5 and above) interactions.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge Dr Jeroen Warner (WUR), Dr Robbert Biesbroek (WUR), Dr Annemarie Groot (WUR), Dr Anamika Barua (Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, India) and Caroline Lumosi (Universitat Osnabrück) for useful insights on the analysis presented. The research was conducted as part of the PhD trajectory and for detailed analysis please refer Vij et al 2019 - Non-decisions are also decisions: power interplay between Bangladesh and India over the Brahmaputra River (published in Water International).
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