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## Water Diplomacy In South Asia And Its Impact On India's Foreign Policy

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### Abstract:

The politics of South Asian states has always attract the foreign policy exports towards it. Due to it's Volatile Nature. Though once upon a time these states were part of colonial empires but after getting freedom from their colonial masters forgetting their common history they rather focused on common geography for their unilateral development. This States has witnessed many war and conflicts between themselves on issues of border tensions. The recent one addition to the area of conflict is water. In one sentence it can be said the South Asia is swinging towards a future water war. The growing population and rapid industrialization has forced the state in this region to have a special look on transborder water resources. Lack of proper management system and wellbalanced treaties or negotiation mechanism has created the stage for a future intense war. From the Helmand to the Mekong, all the transborder rivers are now bone of conflicts between the developing countries of South Asia. India being situated at the heart of South Asia and a prime member of SAARC and ASEAN has always finds itself in the both side of water politics. Sometimes it has shown it's Big Brother attitude and sometimes it has become a victim of it. Presence of aggressive China and assertive Afghanistan and Pakistan is always a cause of concern for other peace-loving states in this region. Though there are many treaties on sharing of water between States but these are not sufficient and some among them has lost their relevance in 21<sup>st</sup> century with passing of times and situation. Now time has come that this state should develop a clear stands on the water issue to avoid the future mutual destruction. Being a leading country of South Asia and emerging actor of global politics India's foreign policy should also focusing on it in a serious manner.

**Keywords:** South Asia, SAARC, ASEAN, Helmand, Mekong.

## **Introduction.**

According to Mahatma Gandhi Nature has enough potential to fulfill the needs of human civilization but not the greed of it. This opinion of Mahatma Gandhi is suitable with the present situation on water conflict among countries of the world. Water Scarcity and water needs has created a suitable stage for Third World War. A thin miscalculation may trigger the bottom of Third World War. The war on nuclear weapon is over, now the war on water has already started. Growing population and climate change has worsen the situation much more faster in 21st century. If we believe the estimation of UN and other International Agency, by 2035 around Three billion people will face the evil consequences of water scarcity. This number is quite alarming. The developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America will face the grave situation of water scarcity due to their growing population, Rapid industrialization and changing pattern of living.

Challenges of water scarcity and demand for more water can be clearly seen in South Asia due to presence of two major developing and heavily industrialized countries that is India and China. Surprisingly most of the river and water bodies of this region are trans-national in nature. All the states of South Asia including these two are agrarian economics. The major source of the GDP of these countries is based on agriculture which requires high amount of water. From domestic consumption to industrial usages everywhere water needs are imbalanceing the sustainable goals of these countries. All the state of this regions depends upon trans-national water for their economic development which is now a case of concerns. Water sharing of common water without proper water mechanisms is like shooting your target in a blind eye<sup>i</sup>. Though India has water treaties with Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan but other countries like China, Afghanistan and Iran has not such type of treaties with any countries which is not a good sign. Without concerning other China is unilaterally using the international waters forcing other lower riparian states like Bangladesh, Vietnam and India to raised their voice and take steps against oppressive China in global forum. In recent times the war of words between the Afghanistan and Iran over the Helmand river has intensifies the region with another devastating war waiting. The sharing of water between India and Pakistan so also India and Bangladesh is not conflict free. Now time has come to retrospect all the issues and find a suitable solution to it. Unless the future of South Asia will again go to doom days<sup>ii</sup>.

## **Water War in South Asia : A Historical Analysis.**

From the dawn of the Civilization River has played a crucial role in development till dates. Rivers are regarded as life givers and freshwater is fundamental to life. Rivers in South Asia are the only thread which binds all the states together in one side but in other side the distribution of river water is the bone of conflicts also. History, Geography and Politics all these three has its own role in this area of conflict. Water sharing is the issues that constantly charged the atmosphere not only between India and its neighbours what also between other states of South Asia. In the history of last 75 years water war is going on only to pacify the needs and ugly nationalism related to water

sharing among states of this region. If we go through details of these will find lack of proper mechanism and water mis-management the black spot which can be wipe out our controlled to avoid future water war<sup>iii</sup>.

### **India and Pakistan.**

After the horrorfull partition of 1947, two States emerged out one is India and another is Pakistan. This partition was based on religious consideration but there are certain other issues which left on turned but needs to be considered at the time. Among them was sharing of the water of Indus River. Indus river which is regarded as lifeline line of Pakistan and Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab has its origin from Manasarovar Lake in the Tibet. It is one of the largest river systems of the world with Many tributaries and distributaries: like Beas, Chenab, Jhelum, Ravi, and Sutlej. Being an upper riparian States India's stance to alter or restrict the flows of these tributaries always objected by Pakistan as these small things is alter the life of Pakistan a large.

For the first time after independence the issues was in focus when India halt the natural flow of Sutlej in 1948. Hostilities over sharing of common water continues till 1960 when the World bank negotiated between the two parties India and Pakistan and a treaty was signed between the two States for mutual sharing of Indus water.

“ The Preamble of the Indus water treaty says that the two government were equally desirous of attaining the most complete and satisfactory utilization of the waters of Indus system of rivers and recognized the need for fixing and delimiting in a spirit of goodwill and friendship, the rights and obligations of each in relation to the other concerning the use of water and of making provision for the settlement, in a Cooperative spirit, of all such question as may here after arise” ( Preamble of Indus Water Treaty 1960)

According to this treaty Six major rivers of Indus system was divided between two Nations. India was given exclusive rights over the Sutlej, Ravi and Beas while Pakistan got the rights over Indus, Jhelum and Chenab. Under this treaty, both the nation agreed to co-operate in undertaking engineering work and exchange of data related to water sharing they also agreed on the proposal that if any conflicts arise over sharing water it may by settled by the Indus Water Commission having Commissioner from both the side if unsettled then case may be go to neutral expert if not then go for arbitration. Though the Indus water treaty tried to pacify every concern of both the nations at two side of Indus River. But after some years of existence both the side started raising questions over it. Both the side narrate themselves as the victims and sufferer of the treaty and the fight continues<sup>iv</sup>.

The recent addition to the conflicts is on the projects initiated by India and objected by Pakistan as it is against the base line of Indus water treaty. The major disputes are over 690 MW. Solar Hydroelectric Project started in the year 1970-72 Wullar project started in the year 1984, 330 MW Kisanganga over River Jhelum, The Baglihar Dam over Chenab River. Though the thing are unsettled but has not gone beyond the line as both side are still referring Indus water Treaty as the base on which they are working.

## India and Bangladesh.

Indian Bangladesh shares 54 waters between them which is the highest numbers between any two countries. The major among these 54 rivers are Ganga, Brahmaputra and Teesta making water management a complicated issue between two. The water conflicts between India and Bangladesh stands over the issue of upper riparian and lower riparian position. Being the lower riparian States Bangladesh formerly known as the West Pakistan has always been a sufferer of water mismanagement. Bangladesh emerged out as a separate country in the year 1971 with the help of India. One year after its existence it signed a treaty with India to form a Joint River Commission (JRC) to govern all the inter state rivers and address any issues arising from 1972. Due to proactive role of JRC Three short term agreement like the Ganga Water Agreement of 1977, MoU of 1985 and Ganga's River Treaty of 1996 were signed and Ganga water issues has been resolved but Teesta water sharing is still a pending conflict to be solved between both the countries.

In the late 1980s India constructed a barrage on the river Teesta at Gajaldoba in Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal. Rangapur division of Bangladesh is solely depend of Teesta water not only for their agriculture but also for their domestic usages. Bangladesh has raised a concern that due to construction of dams on Teesta River on upper catchment area may shrink the natural flow of water resulting, water crisis on dry season and floods in rainy season though Teesta water negotiation started in 1951 till date any final agreement has not signed between both countries due to presence of West Bengal government as a obstacle. As per Indian constitution water issues is placed in state list so without taking consideration of state government center can't signed any agreement on it. Many times, both the countries reached near the conclusion but unable to complete the agreement due to opposition from West Bengal government so also not to lose a major chunk of population against the government<sup>v</sup>.

Another grey area between India and Bangladesh foreign relation is the issue of Farakka barrage to flush sediment from the port of Kolkata India has diverted the water of Bhagirathi Hooghly River system by constructing Farakka barrage on river Ganga. Bangladesh being a state in lower stream claim that availability of water lower catchment areas has been reduced to a limit causing problem in irrigation and also harming fisheries and fish production in the areas. Bangladesh has also repeated the same concerns over the Tipaimukh Project over Barak River. Bangladesh has also officially protested on the river linking project of India. It apprehends that if the river like a Ganga, Brahmaputra and Teesta linked with each other. It will lead to flooding in Bangladesh in rainy season and intensify the counteracting dry season due to scarcity of Water.

## India and Nepal.

In contrast to Bangladesh and Pakistan Nepal is the upper riparian States having four major rivers flowing into India. These rivers are Mahakali, Gandaki (Narayani), Karnali and Kosi. Where there is river there is disputes. The history of water disputes between India and Nepal is not new one. It has its origin 200 years back from their Treaty of Sugali signed between British government and the king of Nepal in the year 1816. As per the Treaty the river Mahakali was officially declared as a border river between India and Nepal. But unfortunately, there were

no mention about the tributaries and distributaries of river Mahakali in the treaty as a result both side has different views over the originality of river Mahakali. The Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar largely depend upon the river Mahakali, Kosi, Gandak and Karnali for both agriculture and industrial usages. India and Nepal have shared many agreements over sharing of river waters in the form of...

1. Sarada Agreement/ Mahakali Agreement (1920).
2. The Kosi Project Agreement (1954).
3. The Gandak Irrigation and Power Project Agreement or The Gandak Agreement (1959).
4. The Mahakali Integrated Treaty in (1996).

But still conflict is there over use of water resources primarily related to flood control and potential dam project. Nepal is the upper riparian state and due to lack of storage capacity and diversion plan of it causes devastating flood in state of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. India has also raised concern over active presence of China in Nepal by helping Nepal in contracting Dam to produce hydroelectricity. Which may affect the water availability in two depending states of India.

### **India and China.**

After border issue any other one that affect India's relation with China is issue of water sharing. The Brahmaputra River which originates from the Manasarovar Lake of Tibetan plateau flows through China, India and Bangladesh to reach the Bay of Bengal. As all the three states are populous state heavily depend upon industry and Agriculture. The sharing of Brahmaputra River has now become issue to resolved between them. China has completed Zangmu Dam the largest hydropower dam over this river to flare up the controversy since 2014. India and China shares five major rivers between them. These are Indus, Brahmaputra, Sutlej, Kosi and Ghaghara all these rivers are not shared uniquely between these two rather it has sharing with other neighbours also.

1. Indus River between China, India, and Pakistan.
2. Brahmaputra between China, India, Bangladesh, and Bhutan.
3. Sutlej between China, India, and Pakistan.
4. Kosi between China, Nepal, and India.
5. Ghaghara between China, Nepal and India.

For all this rivers China is the upper riparian state and India, Nepal is the middle riparian state. Among all these rivers the tension is over the Brahmaputra on both China. Tibet and India depend upon it for its hydropower potential. Even this river is also related to Sino Indian border disputes. China is facing acute water shortage in result trying to divert water flow of Brahmaputra to its dry north by constructing dams and barrages. Which has now created a catastrophic situation in the lower downstream areas of India and Bangladesh. China being at the

upper stream of the river is in a advantageous position has not shown any willingness to sign agreement which downstream countries over transboundary rivers. Even many times Chinese authority denies to share water data with neighbouring countries. Sudden release of water is causing heavy flood in Assam and Bangladesh, where in dry season the river Brahmaputra dries up to her lowest level. China being a member of UN Security Council always blocks any proposal related to this at international level to strengthen her dominance on it<sup>vi</sup>.

### **Water conflicts on the Mekong River.**

The Mekong River without which thinking about the economy of South East Asia is a complete Madness. Around 60 million population lives along the river are facing crises today due to the Water conflicts arising on the river between Six Asian countries China, Myanmar, Thailand Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam without taking into granted from other five. China has constructed a huge Dam over this river for her sole benefits causing severe economic loss, food insecurity and displacement in other countries. The Mekong is the 12th largest river of the world and second largest river with plant diversity and fish wealth after the Amazon. The Mekong Delta is regarded as the rice pot of the world due to its agriculture richness. The river provides 2 million tons of fish every year. Due to unequal share of water and water resources among the 6 countries is threatening the peace and stability in the region.

As the Mekong River has its origin from the Tibetan Plateau China has focused all his resources on building largest number of dams in the river basin on that plateau. China has built Six huge dams on the Mekong River causing lethal damage on the downstream. Even more dam construction is going on. The Mekong River is dying due to unrestricted construction of Hydroelectric dam. Due to war instability and political unrest the lower Mekong region States has not built any Dams on it. Though many time plan are chalked out. In 1995 Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam signed a treaty to promote Corporation on the use and management of lower Mekong subregion and establishment of Mekong River Commission. But the lower government found it difficult to implement the Treaty. Though Laos government has announced to build nine dams on lower Makong the proposal is at cold storage due to rampart corruption at Government level due to lack of any proper agreement on water and water resources sharing among the Six dependent countries the war on words is going on and may create war at battlefield in future.

### **The Silent War Over Helmand.**

The Helmand River is the vital source of water for both Iran and Afghanistan. The major source of this river water is being used for agriculture and livelihoods of these two countries. For a century or more both the countries has exiting conflict over sharing of river water. The Helmand the longest river of Afghanistan originates near Kabul the capital city of Afghanistan and flows in south west way direction through desert areas before emptying in to lake Hamun between Afghanistan Iran border. Lake Hamun is the largest freshwater lake in Iran fed by Helmand. Any development on Helmand River has its direct effect on lake Hamun. Both the river and the lake have its importance for the regional environment and economy. Both Afghanistan and Iran have signed an agreement

called the Helmand River Treaty in 1973. The Treaty was signed with aim to regulate the allocation of river water but became unsuccessful due to non-ratification of it time to time sever causing mistrust and disagreement between two countries<sup>vii</sup>.

Iran has blamed Afghanistan over violating the Treaty by constructing dams and irrigation system along the river causing reduction of water flow to Iran. On the other hand, Afghanistan has blamed climate factor and shortage of rainfall for this. Though each country has mutual goodwill over opposing USA hegemony but difference over the Helmand River which needs to be short out soon.

### **Co-operation The Only Solution Managing Conflict.**

The water war among the state of South Asia may open the way for regional instability and problematic solution in future. To avoid any future complexity the South Asia States, need to show their political wisdom and statesmanship to find solution from their own pragmatism. ASEAN countries needs to learn from there past mistake and follow the successful model of other countries of Europe and North America to manage the water conflict between themselves. They have to develop their own method of Management to avoid any conflict in future.

The sharing of hydrological data is the prime one on which focus needs to be put on. By sharing of exact hydrological data may develop a mutual trust among the countries resulting mutual cooperation to chalk out the problem. Establishment of JRC (Joint River Commission) to look after the issue and care the transboundary waters and regular talks and exchange of information may create a gateway for peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit, the best example of it is the Joint River Commission between India and Bangladesh over Ganga river of 1972 other countries may follow model like this. All the countries of South Asia must set on a common table to established a body having force to solve any issue among any South Asian States on the model of UN with focusing upon solving the future water crisis.

Also, extensive research needs to be carried out to find proper solution for proper management of inter and intra boundary water bodies. Water export or water negotiator maybe appointed from time to time to ease out the complexity going on among States to find a proper solution. Track II diplomacy, Multitrack diplomacy and integrative approach may be followed to strength then people to people contact only in eye of avoiding future unrest. Countries like China and India having high economic potential needs to confined their Big Brother attitude rather they should follow certain principle of internationalism by which the existing problem may not be aggravated.

## Conclusion.

The South Asian subcontinent which is the land of one Sixth population of the world is regarded as one of the conflict-ridden regions of the world. The main root of the conflict in this region lies with interstate border issues and transnational water sharing. Historical water issue was a part of them between states during British period and after departure of the British power it became more worsen. Though there are certain agreement and bilateral understanding among countries on mutual sharing of water and water resources still considerable progress waiting to be happen. Poor governance and lack of a joint framework to cope with the emerging problem is the reason behind the regional tension increasing day by day. If we analyze history, we will find bilateral agreement in South Asia did not prove to be very successful so acute participation of regional organisation and mutual understanding among all the stakeholders could address the issues properly and mutual understanding and peace may be prevailed in this land of Buddha and Mahatma who were once a torch bearer of peace in this region.

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## End Notes

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