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## AN OVERVIEW OF GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SIANG RIVER

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### ABSTRACT

Most of the major rivers in the North East India are largely free-flowing, which is a rarity in India and the world. Their basins are home to unbelievable ecological and cultural diversity. Siang is the most important river in Arunachal Pradesh which form the main trunk of mighty Brahmaputra. China has a strategic control over hydro power resources in the South Asian region. China argues that the streams of its transboundary rivers are a matter of its territorial sovereignty. Beijing's over control attitude on such a huge water and hydropower potential often disrupt the geopolitical scenario of the entire region. India, being the nearest neighbor and having a mountainous border largely defined by Mc Mohan line is the worst sufferer of China's attitude. The present paper attempts to assess the importance of Siang River for Arunachal Pradesh; its geopolitics; Chinese consideration and plan on water issues in context of India with special reference to Tibet Plateau- the storehouse of hydropower and significance of Siang River in context Indo- China geopolitics.

**KEY WORDS: Geopolitics, Frontier, Water treaty, Hydropower**

### INTRODUCTION

Geopolitics is a term developed from Political Geography in last Century. As the basics of Geopolitics, the major objective lies in analyzing inter-state relationship and internal adaptations to the environmental conditions. According to *Weigert*, the aim of concerned word is to determine how political organizations are influenced by the adjusted physiographical conditions and how these conditions and factors affects international relations and internal relationship between state and physical environment. Basically, geopolitics is applied political geography. Since its inception from *Carl Haushofer* in 1924, the term geopolitics was given by Pro- German Swede *Prof. Rudolf Kjellen*. Geopolitics is a dynamic concept. It may be looked as an organism in which we try to investigate states' relationship with environment and space and attempt to solve problems resulting from spatial relationship.

Practically speaking, the world is divided 195 geopolitical regions called countries/ states. Of these 6 are Giant states namely Russia (16.38 million sq. km) , china (9.33 million sq. km), USA (9.16 million sq. km), Canada (9.09 million sq km), Brazil (8.46 million sq. km) and Australia (7.68 million sq. km). India, with an area of about 3.28 million sq. km comes next to already mentioned six countries. Similarly India is divided into 28 states and 8 Union Territories of which geopolitically and strategically important Arunachal Pradesh is 14<sup>th</sup> largest state having elongated shape, shares 1,080 km border with China, 440 km with Myanmar and 160 km with Bhutan.



Fig. 1: Location of Arunachal Pradesh and Siang Basin in A.P.

Arunachal Pradesh is a frontier state. It is important to note that frontiers are phenomenon of past whereas boundaries belongs very much to the present (Kristof 1959).

### METHODOLOGY

**Research design:** Descriptive research design has been used for this study.

**Objective:** This study aims to present an overview of the status, problems and prospects associated with the geopolitical significance of Siang River of Arunachal Pradesh- the major trunk of mighty Brahmaputra as well as Indo-China stands on this internationally important issue.

**Data collection and analysis:** Secondary sources of data have been used for this paper. Collected data has been analysed with explained in this study.

### INDO-CHINA CONFLICT

Mac Mohan line, as a boundary between Tibet and India in Eastern Sector was delimited in 1914 by the treaty signed by Great Britain ( for India) Tibet and China though, it was never actually demarcated. Pounds in 1972 clearly remarked on Mac Mohan line that “The maps used may very well have left room for error and there are places along the boundary where a slightly different alignment would be equally consistent with the treaty of 1914. This, however, does not excuse the brusque demands of China and the military aggression of Chinese Government. Indeed one might say that the acceptance of the Mac Mohan Line for some 40 years (1972) without protest from either side has given it almost a legal validity”. But in recent years China with his expansionistic attitude, trying to change the scenario.



Fig. 2: Major Himalayan Rivers and Siang (Tsampo) River Course

Access and control over natural resources have been a central element of international conflicts. In the Asian context, freshwater is increasingly gaining strategic importance. China faces serious problems of freshwater supply due to its large population and its costly process of industrialization and modernization in terms of



environment. Nevertheless, in this regard, China has an important advantage over its neighbors, because of the fact that several great Asian rivers have their sources within its current borders.

Growing population, urbanization, the consequences of climate change – droughts, natural disasters and desertification are all challenging the provision of freshwater all around the world. According to the High Level Panel on Water report, only 2.5% of world's water can be consumed by human beings, and by 2030, there would be a 40% shortfall of water availability. Besides, the distribution of freshwater resources and population is far from balanced and is constantly affected by human actions. In highly populated and developing or new industrialized countries such as China, India, Nigeria or Egypt, among others, the demand of freshwater is increasing, while per capita water availability is coming down due to pollution and mismanagement. Scarcity of resources usually intersects with previously existing problematics – like sectarian and ethnic tensions contributing to the emergence of new international conflicts in the 21st century.

Water conflicts which focus on Transboundary Rivers, sometimes go beyond the access to drinkable water. Issues such as energy security, freedom of access or freedom of navigation are also involved in these conflicts. In this way, a zero-sum game could appear when we talk about river's water as a commodity, that means, the gain of one part are seen as the loss of the other. At this stage when conflicts are more likely to escalate and difficult to settle. In this regard, China's control over the source of major rivers of Asia has a dramatic impact in its bilateral relations with one of its main geopolitical rivals, India, with whom it shares a transboundary river, the Yarlung-Zangbo/Brahmaputra.

### **GEOPOLITICS OF WATER RESOURCES**

China has a significant advantage over its neighbors in the sense that only 1% of its water sources come from other countries. In fact, we should pay attention to which part of the river controls each state in order to understand transboundary river conflicts. Thus, upstream countries, which host the source of the river, have the upper hand. China has not only its independence on freshwater provision, but also the power of influence over neighboring states. This is why China has been defined as an “upstream superpower”.

The sources of major China's and Asian rivers are concentrated in a very specific region, the Himalayan part in the Tibet province. From a Chinese point of view, Tibet is a conflictive province with a prominent independence movement which is considered one of the main threats in terms of national security by Chinese authorities. Hence, the fight against Tibetan separatist movement is not only a matter of territorial integrity and sovereignty, but also a matter of food security due to the strategic importance of Tibet for China's water provision and hydro power.

China has usually maintained a pro-sovereignty foreign policy approach regarding the rivers that are born in its territory. China does not allow any foreign actor to limit its room of maneuver over its rivers and has refused to join multilateral agreements. China does only deal with river issues bilaterally.

Yarlung-Zangbo River- the Brahmaputra when it enters in India, is one of the main rivers in Asia. Its source comes from the Tibetan plateau and the river crosses through China, India, and Bangladesh. At present, China-India relations are strained. Despite the fact that China and India work together and cooperate in some fields such as the BRICS or the G20, they perceive each other mostly as rivals in the Asian context, militarily and economically. In this way, China has implemented a regional foreign policy in order to isolate India by strengthening ties with Pakistan and Bangladesh during last few years.

### **CAUSES OF CONFLICT**

The Sino-Indian border conflict is one of the few land border reclamations that China has not been able to settle peacefully. It comes from the agreement of 1913-1914 signed between British colony of India and a representation of the self-proclaimed Tibetan independent authority. The treaty redrew the border between Tibet and India known as Mc Mahon Line, which ceded the region of Arunachal Pradesh to British India. Nowadays, the mere act of accepting to negotiate any concession from the Chinese side, it could imply to recognize the existence of an independent Tibet in the past. As a matter of national interest, Beijing cannot afford any movement involving the Tibetan province and, in fact, it makes this issue an unsolvable obstacle for settling the conflict in short-midterm.

### **SIANG/BRAHMPUTRA'S GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

For India, the Brahmaputra means the 29% of its surface freshwater provisions, linked to the development of the agriculture sector in the Brahmaputra-Ganges Delta. Furthermore, it is also the source of its 44% of hydropower potential. This is a crucial issue in terms of energy security for a newly industrialized country like ours. For China, the Yarlung-Zangbo is a vital river due to its water flow, even though its course does not cross

any agriculture-rich land, neither it is used as a transport waterway. In this way, the Yarlung-Zangbo is regarded as an underexploited source of freshwater in case of a water scarcity scenario. This is why several influential actors, among them the China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) along with the most nationalist wings of the Communist Party of China, advocate and support a project of diversion of waters from the Yarlung-Zangbo River as a solution for the water scarcity that hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens are facing. Indeed, an increasing tension between China and India would surely improve the PLA influence on Chinese politics and its defense budget.

Actually, in 2002 China announced a divert project from the Yarlung-Zangbo, as part of the "South-North Diversification project", which already diverts water from the Yangtze, the Han and the Huai rivers – in the south – to the Yellow River – in the north. Furthermore, there have also been plans to build a dam to produce hydropower for China that would surpass the Three Gorges Dam. However, China has developed other projects like the Zangmu dam in the upstream of the river, which operates since 2015. In addition, China expects to build up a total of three similar projects, causing the concern of the Arunachal Pradesh. Despite data sharing agreements in this issue included in three memoranda of understanding between China and India in 2002, 2008 and 2013, the accountability of the data provided by China is contested by India's authorities.

How likely is that a conflict over the Yarlung-Zangbo/Brahmaputra could turn into an open war? Not much, at least if we pay attention to its regional and global implications in terms of cost and benefits for both actors. Neither of them can currently afford an exposed flank that would focus most of their respective defense and diplomatic resources. In addition, China is not in a position to engage in massive infrastructure projects for diverting the Yarlung-Zangbo due to logistics and security reasons. Beijing is aware that any major diverting project in this river could face an overall response from the Indian counterpart due to the crucial importance of the Brahmaputra River for agriculture and energy sectors and the freshwater provision of India. Hence, it is unlikely that this concrete issue could trigger a major conflict between both countries in the short-term.

#### KEY POINTS AND CONCLUSION

1. The need of the hour is to have a water treaty with China as we have with Bangladesh and Pakistan.
2. In 2002 China agreed to exchange data on Trans Border Rivers on papers only.
3. Sun Tzu Sun (500 BCE) was a Chinese military strategist and best known as the author of the work *The Art of War*. In his words "Ten thousand methods combine as one; combination that transcend Boundaries; it is the art of combining different elements of these various forms of warfare one of the many ways of unconventional warfare identified by them is environmental warfare" China follows this strategy.
4. Our cordial relations with Russia and USA make power balance in context of China.
5. India must continue to maintain good relationship with neighboring countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan to avoid make shift in strategic attitude of these countries.
6. Climate change in the world as per report of WMO 2016 was the hottest year of history. We need to conserve our environment including rivers for future generations. By creating big dams and other developmental activities in Tibet region threatening the Siang Valley.
7. Phase wise small dams if erected in on mighty Siang, the threat of disastrous flood can be minimized. The devastating flash flood in the year 2000 in Siang Valley was in fact for assessing the downstream situation by doing blasting (probably) in Yarlung-Zangbo (Siang) by China. It was the testing for foundation of big dams which were completed in 2014 & 2020 respectively.
8. India suspect that Chinese hydropower projects could convert the Brahmaputra into a seasonal river implying water scarcity in India.
9. Another risk is the release of flood waters during the monsoon season, which could lead to floods in Brahmaputra river basin in Assam.
10. There are concerns in India that, China can also use these dams in case of conflict to harm India's interests. Like releasing excess water can lead to floods in the downstream areas of N.E. India.
11. Construction of dams is causing pollution. The quality of water flowing downstream has also deteriorated.
12. The disruption of the natural flow of water could impact the ecosystem of the river downstream and has economic consequences on the lives of people. In November 2017, the water of Siang and Brahmaputra turned black in color which China said was due to earthquake.

13. Most hydro-power projects by China are in the highly volatile seismic zone, where Indian Plate collides with the Eurasian Plate, making them extremely earthquake-prone. It raises serious concerns about risks posed by big dams built in such seismically sensitive areas.
14. Despite China having 50 percent spatial share of this 3,000 km-long water system, low precipitation and desert conditions mean that Tibet generates only 25 percent of its total basin discharge, while India, with 34 percent of the basin, contributes to 39 percent of the total discharge.
15. Any forward movement on ensuring hydro-security in the Brahmaputra basin would require a long-term understanding between the two countries. It is necessary for India to engage China in a sustained dialogue and securing a water-sharing treaty that serves the interests of both the countries.
16. There is a need to understand the topographical and geological peculiarities of border region between India and China which is very high risk seismic zone. India is required to go beyond the exchange of hydrological data and try to negotiate on seismic vulnerability aspects with China in the best interests of its people lives and resources of the region.

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