India-China MoU on Transboundary Rivers

*Amit Ranjan, Phd**

During his recent official visit to China from October 22 - 24 2013, Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on transboundary rivers. According to the new MoU, Beijing has agreed to provide New Delhi richer hydrological data on river Brahmaputra during the flood season (May 15 to October 15). As part of the MoU, India can also ask for data relating to dams being built by China on river Brahmaputra. Prior to this, India and China has signed four MoUs/agreements on transboundary rivers water sharing: (a) MoU between the Ministry of Water Resources of India and Ministry of Water Resources of China on the provision of hydrological information of Brahmaputra river in flood season by China to India in 2002; (b) MoU on sharing of hydrological information of the Sutlej river in flood season by China to India in 2005;(c) an expert level mechanism was set up to discuss interaction and co-operation on sharing flood season hydrological data, emergency management and other issues regarding trans-border rivers in 2006; and (d) a follow-up MoU in 2008 on the provision of hydrological information on the Yaluzangbu/Brahmaputra river in flood season by China to India from 2008-2012. Yet there remain many unaddressed issues related to transboundary river water sharing agreements.

There are a number of reasons for growing tensions over transboundry river water including decreasing per capita availability of water in China, and pollution of the available sources of fresh water. The per capita availability of water in China was 2000 cubic meter in

2012, while it was 1545 for India in 2011. This is constantly decreasing in both countries. Significantly, both are not *sui generis* rather a global phenomenon.

While water quantity is an important issue, the quality of available water is also of concern. Water pollution has affected the quality of water in China. According to *United Nations Human Development Report* of 2006, due to water pollution, thirty per cent of Yangtze river is almost dead. Further, it is estimated that about 6,000 lakes in China could turn dry. In *The River Runs Black*, a book by Elizabeth Economy, it has been noted that China's spectacular economic growth over the past two decades has dramatically depleted the country's natural resources and has resulted in pollution.

In addition to quantity and quality of water, another challenge for China is the spatial distribution of available water resources. The Huai, Hai and Huang (Yellow) River Basins (3-H river basins) are important economic regions of China and constitute just under half the country's population. This region has forty per cent of agricultural land, and contributes about one-third to China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Each basin now falls below 500 cubic meters of per capita water, making the 3-H river basins area of 'acute scarcity'.

The above situation has the potential to put a brake on China's economic growth. To manage this situation, China has already initiated a number of multipurpose projects over transboundary rivers to tap water. The Great Western Extraction or *Xibu da kaifa*, which would transfer huge volumes of water from Tibet to the Yellow River, was one of the initial steps in this direction. This project was announced in 1999 by the then Chinese President Jiang Zemin. In November 2005, the great western route project got further support after the publication of a book titled *Save China Through Water From Tibet*, written by Li Ling, which listed various causes and options for tapping the Yaluzangbu. Other than this water transfer project, a few multipurpose dams have been constructed, while others are in the pipeline. This construction spree by an upper riparian state adversely affects the middle and lower riparian states. Almost all lower riparians like Myanmar, Thailand, Russia, India etc have their share of grievances against China's water sharing policy.

River Brahmaputra is a hydrological life line for India's northeastern states over which China has plans to build twenty eight dams and two of these have severe consequences for the northeastern India. The first is a run-of-river dam on the great bend of the Brahmaputra in Zangmu in eastern Tibet, where it turns south to enter India at Namcha Barwa. It is expected to be the world's biggest hydroelectric dam, with height of 3,370 feet, generating 38,000 megawatts of energy, twice the capacity of the Three Gorges Dam. The second is at Shoumatam, east of Lhasa.

Besides river Brahmaputra, there are other rivers like Sutlej, which originate in Tibet and flow into India. In 2000, China did not share timely information with India about the creation of an artificial lake in Tibet that caused severe flood in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. There are confirmed reports about China constructing a dam over river Indus. These activities by China have serious repercussions for India's water and food security.

As India is middle riparian for most of the rivers originating from Tibet, any disturbance in their flow affects the lower riparians too. Bangladesh, is a lower riparian to river Brahmaputra and gets affected by any form of regulation by the upper riparian. Likewise, any disturbance in the flow of Indus River System affects the water needs of Pakistan. Hence, India can collaborate with Pakistan and Bangladesh, and negotiate over transboundry rivers water sharing issues with China. The present MoU, though a step forward, is just a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) followed by India and China on transboundary river water issue.

** Amit Ranjan, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi.*