Can Robust Bilateral Cooperation on Common Rivers between Bangladesh and India Enhance Multilateral Cooperation on Water Security in South Asia?

Mirza Sadaqat Huda

Introduction

The Himalayan river system, which is made up of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, has a combined drainage area that covers the countries of China, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The basin of the Indus river, which originates in the Tibetan plateau, is the lifeline of regions in China, Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. The perception of the subcontinent being an India-centric region does not arise solely from the disparities in resources and power, but also from the geographic reality of all countries in the region sharing a border with India, and some of the most significant rivers passing through its territory. India, thus, stands in a unique position to initiate vigorous multilateral cooperation on water issues in the region. Despite this, the low level of integration, perennial conflicts, mistrust and misinformation that have plagued relations between South Asian countries have hindered regional cooperation on water security.

Although multilateral cooperation on basin management is the ideal solution to water security issues in South Asia, due to the low level of regional integration, this may be preceded by holistic bilateral cooperation between two suitable countries. India has already had military conflicts with two of its co-riparian neighbours, Pakistan and China. The continuing discord between India and these two countries on a variety of issues is bound to hamper any comprehensive collaboration on river basin management. Bangladesh has maintained friendly ties with India since its independence but has never been subservient to her larger neighbour. This is exemplified by the vocal and constant protests by policymakers and civil society against India’s denial of the downstream country’s rightful share of water resources. Bangladesh and India, owing to their unique relationship, could be ideal partners to initiate robust cooperation on bilateral river basin management, which may set a precedent for multilateral cooperation on water security in South Asia. The two issues currently being negotiated bilaterally—an agreement to share the waters of the Teesta river and reviewing the impact of the proposed Tipaimukh Dam—thus present ideal opportunities to envision the advantages of cooperation by Bangladesh and India on water issues, as transcending national interests to impact regional ones.
Disputes over the sharing of common rivers have defined the very essence of the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India. This relationship, which ideally should have thrived on India’s benevolent role in Bangladesh’s War of Liberation, as well as on the commonalities in culture, language and democratic aspirations, has been hampered by a range of disputes, with the sharing of water resources being the primary issue of contention. Historically, water-related disputes between Bangladesh and India have revolved around the issue of the sharing of waters during the dry season of March to April, the lack of cooperation on information sharing on the flow of common rivers, and the adverse impact of the Farakka barrage on Bangladesh. All these issues continue to be a source of grievance in Bangladesh despite the signing of the Ganges Treaty in 1996—the only bilateral agreement that covers one of the 54 common rivers. The lack of visible and effective consultation on the planning of unilateral projects on common rivers, misinformation, the lack of consensus on crucial issues, and other political impediments have greatly hampered progress on cooperation on the common rivers that traverse through these two friendly but often disputative neighbours.

In the face of stagnated cooperation, Bangladesh and India continue to face varying levels of water insecurity. The regional and seasonal variations in rainfall in Bangladesh and India give rise to destructive floods and prolonged droughts, with severe repercussions on local and national interests. Arsenic contamination caused by the over-extraction of groundwater in India for agricultural purposes has created severe health risks. In Bangladesh, the issue of arsenic contamination has reached alarming levels, with some analysts predicting that as much as 60 per cent of the groundwater is contaminated by arsenic. In both countries, the intrinsic link between water and food security has caused the security of water resources to be a fundamental component of national policies.

Notwithstanding the similarities on some water-related issues, Bangladesh’s water security concerns are unique, as the country’s dependence on the water of common rivers and its geographical location as the lowest riparian country of a majority of these rivers make it extremely sensitive to unilateral diversions by India. Despite several initiatives to create a comprehensive water management regime, due to 75 per cent of Bangladesh’s water resources originating outside its borders, without the active cooperation of upper riparian countries the implementation of any comprehensive national water policy is unfeasible.

Nonetheless, significant progress has been made in recent times by Bangladesh and India on some crucial water sharing issues, particularly in the formation of a joint research team to review the proposed Tipaimukh hydroelectric project on the transboundary Barak river, as well as the arduous but steady process towards reaching consensus on the modalities of an agreement to share the waters of the Teesta river. This renewed interest in solving water-related disputes, as part of the wider initiative to resolve several outstanding issues, has been the result of a significant improvement in bilateral relations since 2009. However, Bangladesh and India must not be satisfied simply by undertaking limited agreements, based solely on the principle of establishing sovereign rights over water, regarding the Teesta, as has been the case of many bilateral agreements in South Asia. Although they make significant progress towards cooperation, such agreements do not take into account the effects of growing populations on the demand, or the impact of climate change on the supply and quality of water resources. In regard to the Tipaimukh project, progress made on collaborative research
should give way to a comprehensive bilateral agreement which will emphasise shared responsibility and indivisible security regarding planning and implementation.

As two countries that have re-invigorated a historic friendship constrained over the years by mistrust and neglect, Bangladesh and India must take the next step to set an example of robust bilateral cooperation on water resource management regarding the Teesta and the Tipaimukh. Upcoming elections in both countries have motivated the governments to resolve these two issues as early as possible. Although this is encouraging, the issue of comprehensive collaboration on river basin management of the Teesta, ensuring a valid stake for Bangladesh in the decision-making process regarding the modalities of the Tipaimukh project, and countering the effect of climate change on common water resources are issues that should be given prominent significance in future agreements.

Water as a regional issue
Academics and analysts have often highlighted the impact of water sharing disputes on the trajectory of the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India. The magnitude of the threat posed by water insecurity is, however, much larger than these two countries. In 2025, when the world’s population is expected to grow to nearly 8 billion people, two thirds of the world’s population—more than 5 billion people—will be faced with water stress, a condition where the lack of adequate water supplies becomes an impediment to socioeconomic development. The severe repercussions on the state and the individual resulting from water scarcity include challenges to political legitimacy, food insecurity and loss of livelihood. It has been predicted that a combination of these and other factors may lead to conflicts in the future.

The brunt of this looming water crisis is expected to be borne by the developing world. This includes the countries of South Asia that are currently home to one quarter of the world’s population but contain about 4.5 per cent of the world’s renewable water resources. According to a report by the Intelligence Community Assessment, almost all countries of South Asia have areas that would be subjected to severe, extreme and exceptional water stress by 2025. Currently, water issues play a key role in inter-state as well as intra-state politics in South Asia, and the volatile nature of water politics in the region is set to be further exacerbated by the looming water crisis. Despite the recognition of this threat by individual countries, examples of regional cooperation on water security have been few and far between. The politicisation of water sharing issues, overt nationalism, unilateral diversions and bureaucratic inefficiency have severely undermined bilateral cooperation, whereas a multilateral approach to basin-wide cooperation remains a dormant theory.

Bangladesh–India cooperation on common rivers: implications for the region
Given that the issue of ensuring water security has garnered pre-eminence among national governments in all South Asian countries, perhaps a new way of conceptualising Bangladesh–India water sharing cooperation would be to determine whether building on the current progress and the timely mitigation of longstanding issues—particularly by moving away from the limited agreements of the past towards greater collaborative arrangements to not only establish sovereign rights but also to harness the waters of common rivers—can set the tone for mutually beneficial multilateral cooperation on water issues in the region.
If perceived from a socioeconomic and politico-cultural approach, Bangladesh and India share a unique relationship within the complex geopolitical matrix of South Asia. Bangladesh is the only Muslim majority country in the region that shares India’s secular and pluralistic values, in addition to strong cultural and linguistic ties. Bangladesh’s War of Liberation in 1971 has defined a distinctive national identity which, while retaining its historical and cultural ties to India, steadfastly maintains its territorial and political integrity, the independence of its foreign policy interactions as well as awareness of its legitimate rights under international law. This sets it apart from some countries in South Asia who had, in the past, held extremely confrontational attitudes towards India, or continue to do so today. Bangladesh’s insistence on safeguarding its sovereignty in theory and practice is also different from some countries who may be perceived as being heavily under the influence of India. The uniqueness of the Bangladesh–India relationship in South Asia can, thus, be described as a complex matrix of friendship and confrontation between two secular, democratic and independent countries, one with a Hindu majority and the other with a Muslim majority, based on historical, cultural and societal commonalities, and the presence of several crucial longstanding issues within the gamut of large disparities in size and power. Bangladesh and India thus stand in a position to not only benefit from each other through dynamic cooperation on water security but also make an example to the South Asian region of successful cooperation between a larger upper riparian and a smaller lower riparian country. Ideally, this cooperation would not be based on religion, communalism, hegemony or establishing sovereign rights over water, but on the basic principles of comprehensive cooperation and shared responsibility—which are slowly taking shape within the policymaking bodies of both countries. Concrete results from the negotiations at India and Bangladesh on the Teesta and the Tipaimukh would set an example to countries in South Asia that share confrontational relationships with their neighbours, of the benefits of cooperating on water as well as other issues.

One of the key issues in India–Bangladesh water disputes has been the influence of domestic politics on the outcome of negotiations. The last minute collapse of the Teesta Water Sharing Agreement in 2011 due to objection by the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, has elucidated the intricate role of domestic politics in water sharing issues within the federal system of India. On the other hand, the two major political parties in Bangladesh—the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—have, in the past, held widely differing views on Bangladesh’s bilateral relationship with India and subsequently on water sharing issues. The current ruling grand coalition led by the AL has historically enjoyed a more robust relationship with India, particularly with the Congress Party-led coalition. In the past, the BNP gave the impression that it had significant reservations about strengthening ties with India. The BNP’s position today seems to have changed, and its senior leaders, including Begum Khaleda Zia, have made it known in recent months that the party intends to maintain and develop friendly relations with India. Both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition have visited India in the last couple of years, and there has been a significant effort by India to build a state-to-state relationship with Bangladesh, as opposed to engaging only one political party. Although this shift in the policies of the BNP vis-à-vis India’s initiative to build broad-based political support for a strong bilateral relationship is extremely encouraging, in Bangladesh some significant reservations remain regarding the modalities of the Teesta agreement as well as the impact of the Tipaimukh Dam. One approach that can take advantage of the positive
shift in bilateral relations as well as mobilise domestic political support for water sharing agreements would be to emphasise sharing and developing rather than the age-old practice of dividing water resources. Regarding the Teesta, Bangladesh and India must make river basin management a priority. Cooperation on the Tipaimukh project should not be limited to collaborative research; a joint agreement should also be tabled that would ensure a valid stake for Bangladesh in the decision-making process regarding the design and implementation of the Tipaimukh Dam.

Conclusion

If Bangladesh and India can enter into cooperative arrangements on the Teesta and the Tipaimukh based on resource development and basin management, mutual benefit, indivisible security and equitable responsibility, this may lead to greater confidence building on water issues and the acceptance of water as a common security concern in South Asia. Bangladesh and India must make a radical deviation from past agreements such as the 1996 Ganges Treaty, which emphasised establishing sovereign rights over water, rather than addressing the critical challenges posed by dynamic demographics or the critical environmental threats facing the region. These challenges require strong multilateral cooperation on water issues in South Asia not as a latent policy initiative, but to ensure the very survival of future generations. Bangladesh and India, owing to their unique relationship, must take the responsibly of initiating a wake-up call on the urgency of multilateral cooperation on water security to all other countries in the region. In the long run, cooperative agreements at the sub-regional and regional levels on river basin management can lead to peace and prosperity, and may also be the stepping stone towards economic and security integration in South Asia.

Notes

5. The Bangladesh India Joint Sub-group on the Tipaimukh Project met for the first time in August 2012 to work out the terms of reference over a joint study of the project’s impact on the ecology.
6. An agreement on the Teesta river was due to be signed by the prime ministers of Bangladesh and India in September 2011 but fell through at the last minute due to the complexities of Indian domestic politics. Progress has been slow since then but has featured prominently in bilateral interactions.