

Water control by China can spell disaster for Northeastern India: Crisis in times of Covid-19 and how to mitigate the risk?

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ABSTRACT

The North-Eastern part of India has eight states. As an aftermath of the partition of India in 1947, there exists only a small piece of land called “chicken’s neck”, connecting these eight states to the rest, surrounded by Bangladesh to the South-East (erstwhile East Pakistan) and Nepal to the North-West. This is a region enriched with reserves of natural resources, biodiversity and cultural diversity. Almost the entirety of North-Eastern India lies on the drainage basin of Brahmaputra river (Tibetan: Yarlung Tsangpo) a subset of the larger Ganga-Brahmaputra system. The Brahmaputra river originates in Tibet (China), flows through India, and onwards into Bangladesh. In India itself, the basin occupies an area of about 2 Million square kilometers. This basin witnesses annual flooding resulting in wide-spread destruction and disruption on all avenues of societal harmony of millions of people. In recent years however, there has been increased activity upstream in the Chinese part due to several dam, hydroelectric power and flow-diversion projects. These raise concern in southeast Asia as several rivers originating in China flow into Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Laos. Given the extant degree of hostility from the Chinese side towards India and the recent Galwan valley face off have made the threat more evident. This also increases the chances that China might capitalize on water to impose its expansionist agenda on Northeastern India. It is also suspected that control on water would be exercised to cause planned flooding, disruption and destruction of people, environment and the landmass downstream in India and rest of southeast Asia.

The issues that ensue as a result of water control by China would increase the extant migration of people within and out of the region and would further elevate issues like illegal immigration, sociocultural conflicts, and economic imbalance. Moreover, strategic water control may contribute in worsening the recurrent natural disasters, like flood and drought, in the region and may even cause new disasters downstream. These effects can be easily driven by China as a tool to create unrest in the subcontinent and can be considered as signs of a potential ‘Water War’. Questions that arise therefore are- what are the foreseeable threats and how can they be better estimated? How can we observe early signs before a disaster? What can be the ways to alleviate the damage caused? Can public engagement help us in tackling this issue better?

This study is aimed at highlighting the current strategic challenges faced by Northeast India due to Chinese control of the Brahmaputra waters. We also shed light on how the Covid-19 pandemic has further alienated this region and how there is an increasingly imminent threat for this region due to the acceleration in Chinese activity.

To elucidate how crucial the concern for this region is, news reports, government documents and policies were reviewed regarding the status quo of Northeast India. It was therefore emergent that involving local populace in strategic planning and information archiving, technology development and implementation would be crucial for the upliftment and self-sustenance of this region. Making military science open to the public in selected regions of importance, exchanging personnel and infrastructural resources with the locals and opening new avenues for empowering the locals in tackling recurrent disasters in times like a pandemic will provide them socio-economic stability. Moreover, including formal Military Science education that informs people regarding the strategic importance and role of this region would positively reinforce the efforts in mitigating the imminent 'artificial' disaster and water war as mentioned above. Some of these measures are underway but several more remain to be brought into government’s attention and then into policy making.

Keywords : Northeastern India, Brahmaputra river, Water war, China

