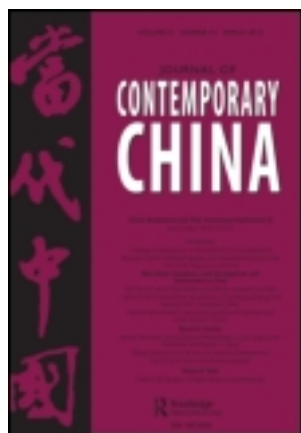


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# River Politics: China's policies in the Mekong and the Brahmaputra in comparative perspective

SELINA HO\*

*China manages its transboundary rivers as a subset of its broader relations with other riparian states. This results in discernible differences in the way China approaches its international river systems. Although there is a limit to the extent of Chinese cooperation, in relative terms China is more cooperative in the Mekong than in the Brahmaputra. To China, Southeast Asian states are part of a hierarchical system where it stands at the apex. While problems exist, there are deep linkages between them, which help foster collaboration in the Mekong. India, which has greater power parity with China, is not part of China's hierarchical worldview. The territorial disputes and security dilemmas that characterize South Asian geopolitics further impede cooperation. Domestic considerations also impact on China's river policies. There is greater consensus among Chinese policymakers in managing the Mekong than the Brahmaputra, which explains the higher degree of clarity in Chinese policies towards the former compared to the latter.*

China's rising power is most keenly felt by its neighbors, particularly those with which it shares common borders and scarce resources. With the Tibetan plateau located within its territory, China's actions as the upstream riparian of the major river systems that flow through South and Southeast Asia carry significant economic and ecological consequences for downstream countries. However, China lacks a comprehensive policy for managing its transboundary rivers. In the absence of such an overarching policy, China manages its international rivers as a subset of its relations with other riparian states. It conducts river politics in the wider context of regional politics. As a result, there are discernible differences in the way China approaches the individual international river systems it shares.

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This paper seeks to understand the driving forces of China's transboundary river policies, specifically why, in relative terms, China is more cooperative in the Mekong than in the Brahmaputra. China's river politics offer useful insights into its international behavior and the calculations behind its foreign policy. Avery Goldstein's insightful work on China's grand strategy points to the two key prongs of Chinese diplomacy: strategic partnerships with the major powers; and multilateralism to reassure its smaller neighbors.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, China's diplomatic tools differ, in accordance with the size and power capabilities of the countries it interacts with. While China generally prefers a bilateral approach, it is more willing to participate in multilateral activities with smaller countries. With larger countries like India, China focuses on establishing strategic partnerships and improving relations through bilateral engagement.

Chinese behavior in the Mekong and the Brahmaputra is consistent with its broader strategies towards the sub-regions of Southeast Asia and South Asia. Until the mid-nineteenth century, China was the dominant power within Central and East Asia. In this hierarchical order, there were no major power centers that could threaten China. To weaker and smaller states on its periphery, China has traditionally displayed benevolence and tolerance. In line with this traditional attitude, as well as to allay concerns of its growing power, China is prepared to participate in joint development of the Mekong, although cooperation is limited to areas which will not compromise its interest and freedom of action. India does not fit into China's hierarchical view of its periphery. Its ambivalent behavior in the Brahmaputra is rooted in the incongruence between China's traditional perception of India as a regional power without global reach and India's growing status as a rival for influence and resources worldwide. The intertwining of territorial and resource disputes in the case of the Brahmaputra further complicates Chinese policies. Chinese behavior in the two river basins is also shaped by how Southeast Asia and South Asia have responded to its rising power. Southeast Asian states have sought to socialize and engage China in multilateral forums, which has helped build confidence and trust. However, South Asia has not sought to engage China in the same manner. South Asian geopolitics, which is best described as Hobbesian because of its highly conflictive nature and the various security dilemmas that plague relations between states, impedes the development of robust multilateral institutions.

Besides analyzing the external impetuses of Chinese foreign policy, it is equally important to understand the domestic sources of Chinese policies. The drive to acquire hydropower for China's impoverished western region, as well as the rapidly growing coastal areas, is a major imperative for China's dam building activities. In the case of the Mekong, Chinese policies are mainly driven by Yunnan Province. Yunnan's provincial leaders regularly represent the central government in Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) meetings, as well as engage in diplomatic activities such as visiting and concluding commercial agreements with the other riparian states. As for the Brahmaputra, a key concern for Indian pundits is the possibility of China

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1. Avery Goldstein, 'An emerging China's emerging grand strategy: a neo-Bismarckian turn?', in John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, eds, *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University, 2003), pp. 57–106.

diverting water from the Brahmaputra for the western route of its south–north water diversion project, although there are no strong indications at this point that such plans are in the pipeline. A project of such magnitude and national importance naturally falls under the direct purview of China’s top leaders. In addition, there are other domestic players with diverging interests involved in the policy process, including the six arid western provinces that are set to benefit from the diversion, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the Ministry of Water Resources, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and various think tanks. The small number of actors whose interests are mostly aligned in the case of the Mekong as opposed to the large number of actors with diverging interests in the Brahmaputra explains why Chinese policies towards the Mekong are comparatively clearer than its policies towards the Brahmaputra.

In this paper, I begin by examining whether China has a comprehensive policy for managing its transboundary rivers, followed by a review of the security impact of such rivers. I then compare Chinese priorities and policies in the Mekong and the Brahmaputra. Lastly, I assess how the external and internal sources of Chinese behavior reinforce each other in explaining Chinese policies in the two river basins. The Mekong and the Brahmaputra are chosen as case studies for two reasons. First, they are among China’s most significant international rivers in terms of annual mean transboundary runoff volume.<sup>2</sup> Second, they facilitate comparison, as the riparian states are of unequal power, that is, the Indochinese states are small states in China’s traditional sphere of influence while India has greater power parity with China.

### 1. A Chinese policy for managing transboundary rivers?

Scholars and experts generally view China as pursuing an ‘upstream strategy’, which is to reject a multilateral framework for managing its transboundary waters. It is one of three countries (the others are Turkey and Burundi) that voted against the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Use of International Watercourses. It has also displayed a similar attitude in the World Commission on Dams, withdrawing its commissioner in 1998 and rejecting the final report of the commission. China’s moves are significant since more than half of the world’s 48,000 large dams reside in China. This traditional aversion to multilateral frameworks for resolving international disputes is well known. Its suspicion and distrust of multilateralism<sup>3</sup> is rooted in its historical psyche of countries ganging up against it. In the case of the Mekong and the Brahmaputra, China fears that multilateralism will encroach on its sovereign rights and freedom of action in managing a key natural resource. Its strategy is thus aimed at preserving its national sovereignty and maximizing its room for maneuver with respect to developing water resources for economic growth.

2. Brahma Chellaney, *Water: Asia’s New Battleground* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), p. 152.

3. Without engaging in a debate on the definition of multilateralism in this study, I have opted to define multilateralism in the broadest sense, using Robert Keohane’s definition, which is ‘the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states’. This definition allows for the inclusion of multilateral bodies, institutions, agreements and diplomacy in our discussion. See Robert O. Keohane, ‘Multilateralism: an agenda for research’, *International Journal* 45, (Autumn 1990), p. 731.

China's greater involvement in multilateral forums since the mid-1990s, however, suggests that it realizes the efficacy of multilateralism in achieving diplomatic goals.<sup>4</sup> China is willing to pursue multilateralism when it is in its interests to do so and when there is a higher level of trust and engagement between China and the countries involved. In this light, its policies towards multilateralism with respect to international river systems vary, and depend on the overall nature of its relations with other riparian states. The interactions between the Indochinese states and China in forums, like ASEAN plus Three, ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN-China Summit, have helped build trust and confidence. This contributes to greater Chinese willingness to participate in multilateral joint development in the Mekong, albeit with limitations—China is still not a member of the Mekong River Commission (MRC). By contrast, there is little information sharing, not to mention joint development, among the riparian states of the Brahmaputra. This can be partially attributed to the limited avenues for confidence building between China, India and Bangladesh.

Beyond this discussion of China's attitude towards multilateral cooperation in the international river basins, however, it is difficult to discern a broad comprehensive Chinese policy on the management of transboundary waters. In an indication of the low priority China accords to managing shared water resources, only one article<sup>5</sup> of the 2002 Water Law deals with international waters. In another indication that transboundary rivers remain in the peripheral vision of Chinese policymakers, the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs established in 2009 under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to negotiate Chinese territorial and maritime disputes does not include international river disputes among its duties. As James Nickum has observed,

The comprehensive reports, strategy papers, water encyclopedias and almanacs published by the China Water and Power Press, the outlet for the Ministry of Water Resources, are virtually silent on the international dimensions of China's river basins, much less that there might be some controversy over their development. Casual inquiries in Beijing of a small number of leading Chinese researchers on water resources and the environment in summer 2005 elicited little knowledge or concern over international waters, aside from the Mekong. Even Ma Jun, a severe critic of China's river basin mismanagement, gives no attention to flows leaving the country in his comprehensive survey of water woes.<sup>6</sup>

As the 'upstream superpower'<sup>7</sup> of Asia, China is in a position to act unilaterally. Less than 1% of China's water originates in other countries; its outflows are over 40 times as great as its inflows.<sup>8</sup> It is thus in the position to reap the benefits of its international rivers while exporting negative externalities to lower riparian states. Intrinsicly and

4. See for example Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'Multilateralism in China's ASEAN policy: its evolution, characteristics and aspirations', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27(1), (2005), pp. 102–122.

5. Article 78 of the 2002 Water Law states: 'Where any international treaty or agreement relating to international or border rivers or lakes, concluded or acceded to by the People's Republic of China, contains provisions differing from those in the laws of the People's Republic of China, the provisions of the international treaty or agreement shall apply, unless the provisions are the ones on which the People's Republic of China has declared reservation'. Available at: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/government/207454.htm>.

6. James E. Nickum, 'The upstream superpower: China's international rivers', in Olli Varis, Cecilia Tortajada and Asit K. Biswas, eds, *Management of Transboundary Rivers and Lakes* (Berlin: Springer, 2008), p. 228.

7. This term is used by Nickum, *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

intuitively, therefore, China has little interest in considering the effects of its actions on others. On China's long list of priorities, China's water authorities are more concerned about inter- and intra-provincial water disputes, as these have direct consequences for China's domestic stability and economic growth.

## 2. Security implications of transboundary water disputes

The lack of attention on the part of Chinese policymakers towards managing transboundary water resources increases the risks of miscalculations and misperceptions among the stakeholders. Against this backdrop, it is useful to examine the security implications of transboundary water disputes in order to achieve a proper understanding of the risks involved. There has been a steady stream of literature in recent years with dire predictions of 'water wars'. In *The Coming China Wars*, Peter Navarro points to China's relentless construction of mega dams as one source of future wars between China and its neighbors.<sup>9</sup> Brahma Chellaney's *Water: Asia's New Battleground* underscores the dangers of inter-state tensions over water to the peace and stability of Asia:

whereas intracountry water conflicts are serious and exact significant costs, the intercountry water disputes and geopolitical competition over transboundary basin resources actually pose a greater threat to peace and stability in a continent already troubled by festering territorial and resource disputes.<sup>10</sup>

World leaders, including former United Nations (UN) Secretary General Kofi Annan, have also pointed to fierce competition over scarce water resources as a possible source of future wars.

However, there are others who argue that states are more likely to cooperate than fight over water. In the largest quantitative study of water conflict and cooperation to date, an Oregon State University–UN study found that cooperative relations between riparian states over the past 50 years have outnumbered conflictive interactions by more than two to one.<sup>11</sup> Since 1948, there have been 37 incidents of acute violent conflicts over water (30 of these were between Israel and its neighbors), while during the same period, about 295 international water agreements were negotiated and signed.<sup>12</sup> Aaron Wolf, a professor at Oregon State University, has argued against the plausibility of international water wars. First, he argues that while there have been past instances of political tension and instability resulting from disputes over water, 'there has never been a single war fought over water'.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the strategic interests of states and shared interests between rational riparian states help prevent costly wars. Moreover, institutions promoting cooperation in international river basins have been resilient. For instance, the lower riparians of the Mekong have

9. Peter Navarro, *The Coming China Wars: Where They Will be Fought and How They Can Be Won* (New Jersey: Financial Times Press, 2007).

10. Chellaney, *Water*, p. 3.

11. *Atlas of International Freshwater Agreements*, pp. 2–3, available at: [http://www.transboundarywaters.orst.edu/publications/atlas/atlas\\_pdf/2\\_WorldsAgreements\\_atlas.pdf](http://www.transboundarywaters.orst.edu/publications/atlas/atlas_pdf/2_WorldsAgreements_atlas.pdf).

12. *Ibid.*

13. Aaron T. Wolf, 'Conflict and cooperation along international waterways', *Water Policy* 1(2), (1998), p. 257. Wolf did note that there was a single instance of a water war fought 4,500 years ago.



weathered wars and maintained an institutional mechanism since 1957 to manage the Mekong. The Indus River Commission has survived two wars between India and Pakistan.

Nevertheless, while there are few historical instances of armed conflict over water, political instability and conflict short of armed violence continue to be security threats. A key weakness of the Oregon–UN study is that it is a large-*N* study that does not assess the quality of cooperation between riparian states. Moreover, the past is not always a guide to the future. Asia's water shortages have worsened in the past four decades as the economies of Asian countries have grown at an unprecedented rate. Asia has less fresh water resources per capita than any other continent, except Antarctica. As a result, competition for water will continue to grow, and the possibility of armed clashes between states cannot be ruled out.

The incongruence between political boundaries and water flows can lead to conflicts between the territorial sovereignty of states and the common resource issues of ownership, allocation, security and environmental degradation.<sup>14</sup> Shared water resources are sources of political and environmental security threats because they are 'common pool resources'<sup>15</sup>—consumption by one party not only reduces the benefits to other parties but can also result in negative externalities for others. Downstream users are particularly vulnerable to upper or mid-stream pollution, extraction or impoundment, which may affect the quality and quantity of water available to downstream users. The actions of lower riparian states can also impact upper riparian states. For instance, dam building by lower riparians can disrupt the natural flow of migratory fish as well as interfere with the navigation rights of upper riparians.

The potential for conflict is further enhanced by the fact that the contentious nature of shared water resources has made agreement on the use and management of international waterways difficult. Enforcement of the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses has stalled because 38 signatories of the Convention have not ratified it. The difficulty in ratifying and enforcing the Convention lies with the provisions that institutionalize the upstream/downstream conflict by calling for both 'equitable use' and an 'obligation not to cause appreciable harm'. As expected, upstream users place emphasis on 'equitable use' while downstream users push for 'no appreciable harm'.

### 3. Chinese policies in the Mekong

China and Myanmar form the upper basins of the Mekong River, accounting for about 24% of the total catchment area and 18% of the total flow.<sup>16</sup> Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand are the lower riparian states. China has two important uses for

14. Evelyn Goh, 'China in the Mekong River Basin: the regional security implications of resource development on the Lancang Jiang', in Mely Caballero-Anthony, Ralf Emmers and Amitav Acharya, eds, *Non-Traditional Security in Asia: Dilemmas in Securitization* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2006), p. 226.

15. 'Common pool resources' are defined as 'sufficiently large natural or manmade resources that is costly (but not necessarily impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from their use'. Definition taken from Roy Gardner, Elinor Ostrom and James Walker, 'The nature of common-pool resource problems', *Rationality and Society* 2, (1990), p. 335.

16. MRC 2005, 2004, *International Water Security*, p. 82.

the Mekong River or *Lancang Jiang*—as a source of hydropower and as a transportation route. Its policies in the Mekong can be described as: (1) limited multilateral cooperation; (2) preference for bilateral engagement; and (3) unilateral approach in dam building.

At the multilateral level, China has been most cooperative in the area of navigation. As one author observed, ‘every other multilateral Chinese initiative towards the river involves improving navigability to facilitate trade’.<sup>17</sup> Navigation is important for Chinese trade between landlocked Yunnan Province and the lower riparian states. China is a signatory of the *Lancang–Upper Mekong River Commercial Navigation Agreement*,<sup>18</sup> which aims to expand the use of the river to transport goods and people so as to facilitate trade and tourism. China has also spearheaded and funded most of the blasting work to remove rapids, shoals and reefs along a 330-kilometer stretch between the China–Myanmar border and Ban Houei Sai in Laos. The gains in trade are most significant for China; nearly all freight vessels plying the middle Mekong are reportedly Chinese.<sup>19</sup> China also signed a GMS agreement in 2006 with Laos, Myanmar and Thailand for a trial program shipping oil along the Mekong during the wet season. The river route is expected to become more significant in the future as China’s energy needs increase; it is cheaper than land transport and provides a safer alternative to the Malacca Straits.<sup>20</sup> China’s lead role in putting together joint patrols of the Mekong with Thailand, Myanmar and Laos in December 2011, following an incident in which 13 Chinese crewmen were killed, reflects the importance it places on the Mekong as a safe navigation route. The joint patrols are also significant because they enabled China, for the first time, to establish a downstream military presence in the China–Myanmar and Myanmar–Laos portions of the Mekong.<sup>21</sup>

The GMS is another platform that demonstrates Chinese willingness to cooperate multilaterally when it is in its interests to do so. The GMS was initiated by the Asian Development Bank in 1992 and is the only regional organization to include all six Mekong riparian states. It is a well-endowed infrastructure program aimed at integrating the Mekong region through the construction of power, transport and communication networks. China was willing to join the GMS because GMS programs focus on economic and infrastructure development and not on sensitive environmental issues. Although environmental initiatives are on the GMS’s agenda, they focus mainly on land ecosystems, and largely ignore river and aquatic environmental aspects.<sup>22</sup>

17. Alex Liebman, ‘Trickle-down hegemony? China’s peaceful rise and dam building on the Mekong’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27(2), (2005), p. 292.

18. Signed in 2001 between China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand.

19. Evelyn Goh, *Developing the Mekong: Regionalism and Regional Security in China–Southeast Asian Relations*, International Institute for Strategic Studies Adelphi Paper 387 (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 30.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Richard Cronin, ‘China and the geopolitics of the Mekong River Basin: Part II’, *World Politics Review*, (23 March 2012).

22. Marko Keskinen, Katri Mehtonen and Olli Varis, ‘Role of China and Cambodia in the Mekong region’, in Nevelina I. Pachova, Mikiyasu Nakayama and Libor Jansky, eds, *International Water Security: Domestic Threats and Opportunities* (Hong Kong: United Nations University Press, 2008), p. 85.



There is, however, a limit to how far the Chinese would engage the other Mekong riparian states on a multilateral basis. Chinese refusal to become a full member of the MRC, the key body that governs the Mekong River Basin, is the starkest demonstration of the limits of Chinese cooperation. China has been a dialogue partner of the MRC since 1996 but has adamantly refused to join the MRC, primarily because it does not want to be subjected to the MRC's provisions on aquatic environmental issues and restrictions on dam building.

China has shown a preference for engaging riparian states at the bilateral level, primarily by offering Indochinese states market access to Yunnan. It is a prominent trading partner of its Mekong neighbors; it imports mineral resources from and exports manufactured goods to Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. While China and Vietnam are competitors for foreign direct investment and markets, China is also Vietnam's leading trade partner—it is Vietnam's biggest importer and third largest exporter, after the US and Japan.<sup>23</sup> In the first half of 2011, China's trade with Vietnam rose 40.9% over the same period in 2010.<sup>24</sup> For Cambodia and Laos, China is the most important donor and foreign investor. The Chinese government provides considerable foreign aid without major conditions attached, although most of these aid packages entail access for Chinese investments. Chinese aid includes support for the transport, communications, health, education, human resource development and construction sectors. As for Thailand, by the end of January 2011, China had become Thailand's second largest trading partner after Japan. From 2009 to 2010, trade rose more than 30% to reach US\$46 billion.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of hydropower development, China is involved in about 21 hydropower projects in Laos and Cambodia, either as an investor or a developer.<sup>26</sup> Most of the Chinese projects are designed and implemented by Chinese companies and backed by the China Exim Bank and Sinosure. China's current role in hydropower development in Vietnam is limited to supplying turbines and other equipment to small and medium hydropower companies. Vietnam currently imports 200 megawatts of electricity from southern China but this is set to reach 2,000 megawatts by 2015, which is a tenfold increase.<sup>27</sup>

China adopts a unilateral stance on dam building. One of the criticisms that lower Mekong riparian states have leveled against China is that it has been evasive and secretive about its dam building activities. It has provided limited data on the operation of its dams and has not shared results from its research on their downstream impact.<sup>28</sup> The drivers of hydropower expansion in Yunnan include the push for

23. 'Vietnam to promote trade with China', *The People's Daily*, (26 May 2011), available at: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90778/90861/7392133.html>.

24. 'Cooperation still a dominant feature of Vietnam-China ties: Ambassador', *Xinhua*, (4 September 2011), available at: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/7588418.html>.

25. 'Thailand and China trade rises 30%', *Thailand Business News*, (23 March 2011), available at: [http://thailand-business-news.com/china/29888-thailand-and-china-trade-raises-30#.T5\\_iDe0SOi4](http://thailand-business-news.com/china/29888-thailand-and-china-trade-raises-30#.T5_iDe0SOi4).

26. Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *WWF and the International Institute for Sustainable Development*, Policy Brief on Rethinking Investments in Natural Resources: China's Emerging Role in the Mekong Region, (2008), p. 3.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Richard Cronin, 'China and the geopolitics of the Mekong River Basin: Part I', *World Politics Review*, (22 March 2012). The MRC countries themselves have also shared little information on their own projects with each other. Richard Cronin and Timothy Hamlin, *Mekong Tipping Point: Hydropower Dams, Human Security and Regional Stability* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2010), p. 15.

economic growth and the associated energy security concerns, the search for cleaner sources of energy, reforms in the energy sector that have led to greater competition among energy companies, and the 'Go West' policy. Yunnan already produces about 10% of China's hydropower but exploitable reserves are considered to be ten times larger than that. If this potential is exploited, Yunnan could eventually supply closer to 20% of the national hydropower production.<sup>29</sup> The Mekong River offers huge potential in this context. The planned cascade of eight dams is designed to take advantage of an 800-meter drop in the middle and lower sections of the Yunnan stretch. Of the eight dams, Manwan, Dachaoshan, Jinghong, Xiaowan and Nuozhadu are already running.

The Chinese government has maintained a positive line on the impact of dam construction. In its view, dams can help increase the amount of water in the river during the dry season and provide flood control during the rainy season. The Chinese have argued that the dams will have little impact on the lower basin because the *Lancang Jiang* only contributes 16% of the Mekong's total discharge.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the level of the upper Mekong critically influences the reaches to China's immediate south—it contributes 100% of the flow at the Yunnan–Laos border, 60% in Vientiane, 15–20% in Vietnam and 16% in Phnom Penh.<sup>31</sup> There are also huge concerns about the impact of the dams on river ecosystems and local livelihoods. An estimated half of the total sediment concentration of the river originates from the upper basin. By trapping sediment, China's dams in the mainstream Mekong have a significant impact on sediment balance and, consequently, on the aquatic life of the river. Through raising dry season water levels, the dams also pose a serious threat to downstream floodplains.

#### 4. Chinese policies in the Brahmaputra

While there exist some mechanisms for cooperation between China and the other riparian states of the Mekong, little or no cooperation exists in the Brahmaputra River Basin between China, India and Bangladesh. Even bilaterally, China has not been forthcoming in sharing hydrological data with India, although in 2002, it inked a memorandum with India for provision of hydrological information on the Brahmaputra River during the flood season. Additional memoranda followed in 2005 and 2008 but implementation has been patchy.

Two key interests shape Chinese policies in the Brahmaputra or *Yarlong Tzangpo* as it is known in Tibet—the harnessing of hydropower and water diversion as part of the south–north water diversion project. China's main project is the construction of a large 3,260 meter dam on the Brahmaputra River in Zangmu, less than 200 kilometers from the Indian border. Despite the Indian government asking for clarification and Indian intelligence services releasing satellite images of the site, China was several months into construction before it formally acknowledged the dam's existence.<sup>32</sup>

29. Stiftung, *WWF and the International Institute for Sustainable Development*, p. 3.

30. Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, p. 43.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Jonathan Holslag, 'Assessing the Sino–Indian water dispute', *Journal of International Affairs* 64(2), (Spring/Summer 2011), p. 23.

Satellite images show that there are at least four construction sites in the vicinity of Zangmu.<sup>33</sup> In addition, there is also reportedly a plan to build a dam more than twice as large as the Three Gorges Dam, the 38-gigawatt Motuo Dam, at the Great Bend, which is located just before the Brahmaputra enters Indian territory.<sup>34</sup> More recently, in January 2013, China made public its 12th Five-Year Energy Plan (2011–2015), in which it revealed its intention to build another three dams along the Brahmaputra—Jiexu, Dagu and Jiacha—close to the Zangmu site.<sup>35</sup>

Of even greater concern to India are reported Chinese plans to pursue major inter-basin and inter-river water transfer projects on the Tibetan plateau, which if realized, may diminish river flows into India and Bangladesh. Although China has repeatedly reassured the Indian government that it does not intend to divert water from the Brahmaputra and it seems unlikely that any diversion would occur any time soon, Indian pundits are not convinced. The Indians are worried that a diversion of the Brahmaputra would severely affect agriculture and fishing, as the salinity of water and silting in the downstream river will increase. What worries India most is that through water diversion, China will be able to acquire greater leverage over India, thus further tilting the power balance between China and India in China's favor.

It seems that China has, at the minimum, considered plans for diverting the *Yarlong Tzangpo*. In 2002, after decades of research and bureaucratic debates, the State Council finally approved the south–north water diversion project. The project consists of three routes: the eastern, central and western routes. The western route is expected to divert water from the rivers in Tibet and Yunnan to the Yellow River. One of several options for the western route is to divert water at the Great Bend. Initial plans were apparently developed in the 1980s, mainly supported by the military establishment.<sup>36</sup> A feasibility study was also conducted in 2003 to assess the potential for a major hydropower project on the Brahmaputra that would divert 200 billion cubic meters annually to the Yellow River.<sup>37</sup>

It is difficult at this point to explicate the exact nature of Chinese plans. The picture is murky and there is much speculation about China's intent flowing out of government and academic circles in India. This lack of clarity is partly the result of irresolution on the part of Chinese decision makers; the controversy surrounding the feasibility of the western route within China itself suggests that Chinese policymakers have not decided on the best way to proceed. Due to the lack of information on Chinese plans, Indian officials and experts have speculated about Chinese motives, leading to accusations being hurled at the Chinese. While Bangladesh, which will suffer the most from any disruption to the flow of the Brahmaputra, has been silent and not made any diplomatic moves to discuss the issue

33. *Ibid.*

34. Chellaney, *Water*, p. 144. Chellaney cited as evidence a map by HydroChina, a Chinese hydro company, that China intends to build the Motuo dam.

35. State Council, *Guowuyuan guanyu yinfa nengyuan fazhan shierwu guihua de tongzhi*, [State Council Announcement on 12th Five-Year Energy Plan], (1 January 2013), available at: [http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2013-01/23/content\\_2318554.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2013-01/23/content_2318554.htm). China announced the building of a total of 60 dams along its rivers in this plan.

36. Holslag, 'Assessing the Sino–Indian water dispute', p. 24.

37. Elizabeth Economy, 'Asia's water security crisis: China, India and the United States', in Ashley Tellis, Mercy Kuo and Andrew Marble, eds, *Strategic Asia 2008–09: Challenges and Choices* (The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2008), p. 384.

with China, India has raised the subject with Beijing on numerous occasions. It formally requested a joint working group to discuss the issue, apparently even directly approaching Hu Jintao in 2007.<sup>38</sup>

Adding to the complexity of the issues surrounding the Brahmaputra, the entire stretch of border between China and India is disputed and militarized. The intertwining of territorial disputes with competition over water resources significantly complicates the management of the Brahmaputra. China's claim to Arunachal Pradesh has been drawn into the dispute, fueling Indian suspicions that China's claim stems from a desire to acquire Arunachal Pradesh's rich water resources. South Asia's larger geopolitical context also feeds into and shapes the Chinese approach towards the Brahmaputra. The historical enmity and the high levels of mutual suspicion among South Asian countries are obstacles to multilateral joint development.

## 5. Assessing Chinese behavior

The case studies on Chinese policies in the Mekong and the Brahmaputra have shown different levels of engagement and cooperation between China and its co-riparian states. In this section, I analyze both the external and internal sources of Chinese policies and behavior. In essence, a realist core underpins and drives Chinese foreign policy and behavior. David Kang, in his examination of East Asia's security architecture, has referred to the hierarchical nature of the Chinese tributary system that had provided a stable political order for East Asia in the past.<sup>39</sup> Hierarchy describes a world order that is based on relative power, with a dominant state at the center surrounded by secondary states. In this construct, humane authority is the Confucian precept that guides the behavior of the dominant state.<sup>40</sup> While one might argue the merit of Kang's case that this hierarchical world system would continue to provide stability in the Asia–Pacific in the future, above all whether the region would actually accept a throwback to or version of the hierarchy-tributary system, Kang's description of the power structure between China and the other riparian states is accurate. However, India does not fit comfortably into this power structure. China has never dominated India the way it did the Southeast Asian countries. Historian John Garver, in his excellent account of the contest between China and India, points to two underlying sources of conflict: conflicting historical narratives of national greatness with overlapping spheres of influence that span across South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East; and the security dilemma that both face in South Asia.<sup>41</sup> The unresolved territorial disputes between China and India are an outcome of conflicts as much as they are the cause of conflicts. The rivalry with India therefore does not sit well with China's perception of its immediate environs and this creates

38. *Ibid.*, p. 385.

39. David Kang, 'Hierarchy and stability in the Asia Pacific', in Ikenberry and Mastanduno, eds, *International Relations Theory and the Asia–Pacific*, pp. 107–162.

40. See works by Tu Weiming and Yan Xuetong, Xuetong Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

41. John Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino–Indian Rivalry in the 20th Century* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001).

ambivalence in Chinese behavior towards India. This is the larger context in which China's policies in the Mekong and the Brahmaputra are played out.

### 5.1. *From river politics to regional politics*

Let me first elaborate on China's relations with the Indochinese states of the Mekong. The power relations between them are asymmetrical. This disparity is defined in terms of the size of the population, economy and military, and is situated in both the historical and contemporary contexts. Historically, the countries in the Mekong region were part of China's traditional sphere of influence. China treated the smaller states in its periphery with benevolence as long as they recognized the superiority of Chinese culture, economy, political system and military prowess. In contemporary times, this idea of benevolence and tolerance towards smaller states continues to shape Chinese policies in Southeast Asia in general and towards the Indochinese states in particular. In line with its campaign from the late-1990s to the mid-2000s to project a benign image, China wants to avoid being seen as a bully and therefore attempts to reassure Southeast Asian countries of its peaceful rise. Its emphasis on 'peaceful development' rather than 'peaceful rise' in the 2000s underscores this point. China's 'New Security Concept', introduced in 1997, emphasizes the importance of strengthening dialogue and promoting mutually beneficial cooperation. China has demonstrated this new approach most prominently in Southeast Asia. It has stepped up its interactions with the region through bilateral and multilateral dialogue, charm diplomacy and increasing participation in regional institutions. This Chinese attitude extends to the Mekong region as well. Thus, even though it has been selective about the Mekong institutions that it joins, Beijing has cooperated and actively participated in joint economic plans for the basin, notably in navigation and infrastructure development.

By contrast, there is greater ambivalence in China's relations with India. Historically, there were trade and religious exchanges between China and India, and at one time, the trade plying the Indian Ocean between Persia, India, Southeast Asia and China became significant enough to push these regions into economic integration.<sup>42</sup> This changed however in the twentieth century, during which Sino-Indian relations were soured by territorial disputes, notably the Chinese rejection of the McMahon Line of 1914 separating Tibet and India, the flight of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959 and the 1962 Sino-Indian border war. The Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s, wars between India and Pakistan, and the subsequent Sino-Pakistani alliance further exacerbated tensions in the region. China's strategy of aligning itself with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh throughout the 1970s and 1980s to thwart India's attempt to establish hegemony in the South Asian region further infuriated the Indians. Although China's relations with India have been steadily improving since the formal establishment of relations in 1979, tensions remain. A classic security dilemma exists between China and India, whereby it is difficult for one party not to see the actions of the other party as offensive moves.

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42. Jerry H. Bentley, 'AHR Forum: cross-cultural interaction and periodization in world history', *American Historical Review*, (June 1996), pp. 753-754.



There appears to be incongruence between China's perception of India as weak and divided in its political system, and India's status as a rising power. While China looms large in Indian foreign policy considerations, to China, India is important but does not occupy the same level of significance in China's foreign policy agenda. China regards India as a regional power while it sees itself as a global power. To China, comparisons with India are demeaning.<sup>43</sup> In the 1990s, China saw a multi-polar world divided into five poles—the US, Russia, Europe, Japan and China—with India excluded.<sup>44</sup> However, India's status as a rising power means that China cannot disregard India's increasing influence in Asia. Both China and India are rapidly growing economies; despite the global recession, GDP growth for China and India in 2010 was 10.3% and 8.6%, respectively.<sup>45</sup> They also have the world's fastest growing militaries, armed with nuclear weapons. In 2012, China and India are set to boost their military spending by 11.2% and 17.6%, respectively.<sup>46</sup> The Indian navy is particularly suspicious of what the US and India have described as China's 'string of pearls' strategy in the Indian Ocean. Both countries are also competing for resources around the world. India has been in petroleum talks with Iran and Venezuela, and has reportedly proposed a natural gas pipeline with Pakistan. China has also been courting South American, African and Middle Eastern governments to gain access to foreign oil fields. Both have also made deals with rogue states like Sudan and Iran to secure supplies of oil and other resources. Moreover, as both emerge as rising powers and aim to restore their past historical greatness, their overlapping spheres of influence bring them into conflict.

The incongruence between China's traditional perception of India and India's rising status creates ambivalence and uncertainty in China's approach to India. This ambivalence partly accounts for the lack of clarity that characterizes China's management of the Brahmaputra. The lack of clarity is also because Chinese policymakers have not made up their minds about the best way forward for the western route of the south–north water diversion project. There are indications that Indian reactions form part of China's considerations in its internal debates on diverting water from the Brahmaputra. It has repeatedly assured India that it has no plans to divert the Brahmaputra, including a statement by the Vice Minister of Water Resources, Jiao Yong, on 12 October 2011.<sup>47</sup>

China's policies in the Brahmaputra River Basin are further complicated by the potent mix of territorial and resource disputes with India. Its entire border with India remains disputed and militarized. It has shared a 4,000-kilometer Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India since 1959, and both countries have increased military deployments along the LAC in recent years. In June 2009, the Indian government announced an additional

43. J. Mohan Malik, 'China–India relations in the post-Soviet era: the continuing rivalry', *The China Quarterly* 142, (June 1995), p. 329.

44. Brantly Womack, 'Asymmetry theory and China's concept of multipolarity', *Journal of Contemporary China* 13(39), (May 2004), p. 363.

45. 'India outpaces China: winning the world growth cup', *The Economist*, (15 April 2011), available at: [http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2011/04/india\\_outpaces\\_china](http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2011/04/india_outpaces_china).

46. 'Budget 2012–13', *The Economic Times*, (16 March 2012), available at: [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-03-16/news/31201687\\_1\\_defence-budget-military-budget-defence-expenditure](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-03-16/news/31201687_1_defence-budget-military-budget-defence-expenditure).

47. 'Relief for India as China says no to Brahmaputra diversion', *The Times of India*, (14 October 2011), available at: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-10-14/india/30278545\\_1\\_brahmaputra-yarlung-tsangpo-india-and-china](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-10-14/india/30278545_1_brahmaputra-yarlung-tsangpo-india-and-china).



deployment of 60,000 soldiers, along with tanks and two squadrons of SU-30 MKI aircraft to Assam, near Arunachal Pradesh, bringing the total number of troops in that area to 100,000.<sup>48</sup> A more recent spat is the Chinese move in April 2013 to station an unusual number of patrols in the mountains of Ladakh, an area that both countries claim, despite Indian protests.<sup>49</sup> In an example of how territorial and resource disputes can become intertwined, China blocked an Indian request for a loan from the Asian Development Bank in April 2009 because it was earmarked for a watershed development project in Arunachal Pradesh. The mix of territorial disputes with water resource competition in the Brahmaputra makes cooperation harder to achieve. Although studies have shown that China is more likely to cooperate in territorial disputes than to engage in violent conflict,<sup>50</sup> there are as yet no comprehensive assessments of Chinese behavior when territorial and resource disputes are intertwined. However, if Chinese behavior in the South China Sea dispute is indicative, we are likely to see a less cooperative China. In his study of China's offshore island disputes, Taylor Fravel has shown that given the economic and strategic values of the Spratlys, Paracels and Senkaku Islands for China, China has engaged in tough bargaining in these disputes and has generally preferred delay to cooperation.<sup>51</sup> According to Fravel,

with just one exception, China has never entered into talks with any of its adversaries concerning the sovereignty of these areas, nor has it indicated a willingness to drop its claims to even just some of the land that it contests.<sup>52</sup>

More comprehensive studies on Chinese behavior in cases where territorial and resource disputes are mixed are needed for us to gain a better understanding of China's likely course of action in such situations.

While realist perspectives drive Chinese policies, there is also a constructivist influence on Chinese foreign policy behavior. There is evidence that socialization in international institutions is having an effect on Chinese behavior. Alastair Iain Johnston makes the case that the ASEAN way has had a fundamental impact on Chinese international behavior, specifically in changing Chinese attitudes and mindsets towards multilateral cooperation.<sup>53</sup> Sebastian Biba, in his study on Chinese behavior towards its transboundary rivers, shows that China has employed a range of strategies to reassure its neighbors, including 'assuaging rhetoric', increasing transparency and institutionalization.<sup>54</sup> China's desire to maintain peaceful relations with its neighbors in order to pursue economic growth is a key factor for its efforts to 'desecuritize' potential water conflicts with its neighbors.<sup>55</sup> Douglass North's classic

48. Kerry Raymond Bolton, 'Water wars: rivalry over water resources', *World Affairs* 4(1), (2010), p. 58.

49. 'Where China meets India in a high-altitude desert, push comes to shove', *The New York Times*, (2 May 2013), available at: [http://www.gov.cn/zwgc/2013-01/23/content\\_2318554.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zwgc/2013-01/23/content_2318554.htm).

50. See, for example, M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 9.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 267.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Socialization in international institutions: the ASEAN way and international relations theory', in Ikenberry and Mastanduno, eds, *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific*, pp. 163–190.

54. Sebastian Biba, 'Desecuritization in China's behavior towards its transboundary rivers: the Mekong River, the Brahmaputra River, and the Irtysh and Ili Rivers', *Journal of Contemporary China* doi:10.1080/10670564.2013.809975, 2013.

55. *Ibid.*

work on institutions argues that institutions are useful for reducing transaction costs by providing a set of rules and norms that constrains states, thereby establishing clear expectations of behavior and reducing the need for monitoring. Institutions are thus useful for resolving the collective action problem that surrounds the management of shared water resources.<sup>56</sup>

The relatively greater level of cooperation that China has displayed towards the riparian states of the Mekong, compared to the Chinese attitude towards the Brahmaputra, can be understood in terms of the different levels of institution building in Southeast Asia and South Asia. Through various multilateral forums,<sup>57</sup> Southeast Asian states have sought to engage and enmesh China in a set of relationships that produces interdependency. This is to reduce the likelihood that a powerful China will act belligerently against its smaller and weaker Southeast Asian neighbors. Key forums that include China are ASEAN plus Three, the Asian Regional Forum and the Shangri-la Dialogue. An initial framework to establish a free trade area between China and ASEAN was signed in 2001, binding China economically to Southeast Asian countries. In the framework, ASEAN and China agreed to cooperate in 11 priority areas, namely agriculture, information and communication technology, human resource development, Mekong Basin development, investment, energy, transport, culture, public health, tourism and the environment. In the Mekong region, apart from the MRC, GMS and the *Lancang*–Upper Mekong Commercial Navigation Agreement, China is also involved in the ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC), which was established in 1996 to enhance cooperation and encourage dialogue among ASEAN countries for the development of the Mekong River Basin countries. The flagship project of the AMBDC is a US\$1.8 billion rail connection between Kunming in Yunnan Province and Singapore.<sup>58</sup>

South Asia, on the other hand, does not engage China in the same manner. There is no regional organization in South Asia that involves China. The Hobbesian nature of geopolitics in South Asia prevents the emergence of robust multilateral mechanisms for managing conflict. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, established in the 1980s and in which China does not participate, provides a forum for discussion of the least controversial topics. The most heated ones, particularly water resource negotiations, were excluded from its agenda at the start. With the exception of one meeting in 1986, negotiations over water have been exclusively bilateral.<sup>59</sup> Unlike Southeast Asia, therefore, there is no avenue for multilateral engagement of China in South Asia that can help foster cooperation and interdependency.

A key lesson to draw from the case studies is that water disputes are subordinate to the larger political context. Water is not just an environmental and resource issue; it has political and security dimensions. For China and its neighbors, China's lack of an

56. Douglass North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

57. For a list of dialogue and cooperation mechanisms between China and ASEAN, please see <http://www.aseansec.org/4979.htm>.

58. Goh, *Developing the Mekong*, p. 26.

59. Ben Crow and Nirvikar Singh, *The Management of International Rivers as Demands Grow and Supplies Tighten: India, China, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh* (UC Santa Cruz: Center for Global, International and Regional Studies, 2009), p. 6.

independent transboundary river policy that is not subject to its relations with co-riparian states compounds the potential for instability. In this context, China's rising status introduces further uncertainty into these transboundary river basins. As the power asymmetry between China and the smaller riparian states of the Mekong grows, China would want to adopt policies that would reassure its smaller neighbors. At the same time, however, it would mean that riparian states on their own would find it increasingly difficult over time to circumscribe Chinese actions should China choose to ignore downstream concerns. The management of the Brahmaputra is even more problematic, given that the dynamics between a rising China and a rising India are even more uncertain than the clear power asymmetry that lies between China and the Indochina states.

## 5.2. Domestic drivers

It is often tempting to think of China as a monolithic unitary state and that foreign relations in particular are set by the central government. But as studies that examine Chinese institutions and local politics show, multiple actors with divergent interests both at the central and local levels characterize the internal mechanics of the Chinese polity. China's vastness, differing local conditions, and conflicting needs and priorities mean that power and authority are fragmented and devolved to lower levels of government. In the management of the Mekong and the Brahmaputra, a critical factor accounting for the difference in Chinese approach rests on the number of actors involved in the policy process and whether their interests align. The larger the number of actors and the greater the divergence of interests, the murkier and less cooperative China's river policies are likely to be.

China's open door policy, which began in the coastal regions in the 1980s, played a large part in expanding the power of provincial governments. Following Deng Xiaoping's 1992 southern tour, privileges previously awarded to coastal cities were fully extended to the inland and border provinces as well.<sup>60</sup> Prior to reform and opening up, Yunnan was a peripheral province. Its ability to tap on the resources of the Mekong was limited to within China's borders. However, as the Chinese economy opened up to the outside world, Yunnan officials began to push for border openings as early as the mid-1980s, and in 1985 obtained permission for the establishment of border trade zones.<sup>61</sup> As Tim Summers amply demonstrated in his article on the narratives for repositioning Yunnan at the center of various regional constructs, the Yunnan provincial leadership actively took the lead in formulating strategies to re-establish Yunnan as a 'bridge, hub or pivot' between China and Southeast Asia.<sup>62</sup> Yunnan's Foreign Affairs Office regularly sends its officials to serve in the Chinese embassy in Laos.<sup>63</sup> Yunnan's leaders also regularly visit the Mekong states and represent the

60. Huang Yanting, 'Qianxi dameigonghe ciquyu hezuo' ['Analysis of great Mekong sub-region'], *Dongnanya congheng* 9, (2007).

61. Tim Summers, '(Re)positioning Yunnan: region and nation in contemporary provincial narratives', *Journal of Contemporary China* 21(75), (May 2012), p. 447.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 451.

63. Peter Cheung and James Tang, 'The external relations of China's provinces', in David Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978–2000* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 102.

central government in GMS meetings. The Yunnan government is also in charge of promoting border trade with the Mekong riparian states, developing infrastructure linking the Mekong countries, viz., railways, roads and navigation, as well as taking steps to attract foreign investment into hydropower projects.<sup>64</sup> To facilitate border trade, Yunnan has bureaus dedicated to border economic and trade management.<sup>65</sup>

China's participation in the GMS and MRC is in large part driven by the needs of Yunnan Province. The high degree of interdependence between Yunnan and the riparian states of the Mekong requires China to cooperate, for instance, in the GMS. A key reason why China, specifically Yunnan, joined the GMS, was the hope that through the GMS, poverty could be eliminated and, through substitution farming, heroin production and hence the drug trade that plagues the Golden Triangle could be eradicated. During the 1990s and 2000s, Yunnan became an important driver of the Western Regional Development Strategy or 'Go West' policy. In this strategy, developing hydropower is seen as a vital sunrise industry to aid the development of Yunnan. Yunnan Province is China's most promising hydropower site; by 2015, the Chinese government intends to transmit eight gigawatts of power per annum from Yunnan to Guangdong, both from coal-fired plants and hydropower.<sup>66</sup> The Yunnan government is also promoting its cultural diversity, biodiversity, mineral endowments and strategic location as a 'gateway to Southeast Asia'.<sup>67</sup>

There is a general alignment of interest between central government policies and provincial interests, specifically Yunnan's interests and the interests of powerful coastal provinces like Guangdong, which are beneficiaries of the effort to increase Yunnan's hydropower production. While economic interests drive the central leadership's policies in Yunnan, Tibet is a much more complicated issue for the central leadership. Tibet, with its separatist movement and close proximity to India, is a national security concern. Any issue pertaining to Tibet is therefore likely to garner top leadership attention and involve a multiplicity of actors and interests from China's security and foreign affairs establishment. Decision-making on the Brahmaputra is therefore likely to be more complex as opposed to the more streamlined process for the Mekong.

The western route of the south–north water diversion project stands at the center of the controversy between China and India with respect to the Brahmaputra. The diversion project is a major undertaking that is driven by the central leadership itself. In the 1950s, Mao Zedong has expressed interest in the feasibility of diverting China's waters from the south to the north, and former Premier Li Peng is believed to have championed the project. The diversion project consists of three routes—eastern, central and western. The western route is the most controversial of the three. It aims to divert water from the headwaters of the Yangtze River to the upper reaches of the Yellow River, and is set to benefit the arid and impoverished provinces of Gansu,

64. Liu Shisong, 'Lancangjiang—meigonghe ciquyu jingji hezuo yu kaifa' ['Subregional economic cooperation and development of Lancang–Mekong River—action Yunnan, China'], *Yunnan dili huangjing yanjiu* 8(2), (December 1996).

65. Cheung and Tang, 'The external relations of China's provinces', p. 101.

66. John Dore, Yu Xiaogang and Kevin Yuk-shing Li, 'China's energy reforms and hydropower expansion in Yunnan', in Louis Lebel, John Dore, Rajesh Daniel and Yang Saing Koma, eds, *Democratizing Water Governance in the Mekong Region* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2007), p. 65.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Qinghai, Ningxia, Shaanxi, Shanxi and Inner Mongolia. A start date has not been set for construction and whether it will actually be constructed is still a topic of debate. Given the technical difficulties, ecological implications and financial costs involved in constructing tunnels in the mountainous region, it is unclear as to how the diversion would take place—diverting the waters of the Brahmaputra being only one possible option. Various experts from the Chinese Academy of Science and the former State Development Planning Commission (now the National Development and Reform Commission) have apparently advocated for the project. For instance, in 2005, Guo Kai, a senior researcher of the Yellow River Water Conservancy Committee, reportedly presented his ideas on the western route to top Chinese leaders.<sup>68</sup> In the same year, Li Ling, an officer from the PLA Second Artillery Corps, published *Tibet's Waters Will Save China*, which listed various options for tapping the Brahmaputra.<sup>69</sup> The PLA is said to have been champions of the project as early as the 1980s.<sup>70</sup> The six provinces and autonomous regions that will benefit from the project are also likely supporters of the western route of the diversion project.

At the same time, there are also those who oppose the construction of the western route. Although an ardent supporter of the south–north water diversion project and the key ministry in charge of the project, the Ministry of Water Resources has voiced objections to the western route. In 2000, then Minister of Water Resources Wang Zhengying told the State Council that developing the western route was technically and economically impossible.<sup>71</sup> His successor, Wang Shucheng, has also voiced concerns over the feasibility and environmental impact of the project. The Ministry of Environmental Protection is also likely to oppose the western route, given the expected ecological fallout. However, the ability of the Ministry of Environmental Protection to influence the outcome of the project is questionable, given that it has limited funding and manpower. Although its mandate has strengthened with the greater emphasis on environmental protection, its ability to weigh in is compromised by both the central and local governments continuing to value economic growth above ecological protection and conservation. While it is uncertain the extent to which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a say in the diversion project, what is apparent is that since the Sino–Indian rapprochement in 1979, it has been at the forefront of efforts to improve China's relations with India. A Sino–Indian fallout over the Brahmaputra is not in its interest. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has repeatedly and publicly denied that China has plans to divert the Brahmaputra.

## 6. Conclusion

To paraphrase Harold Lasswell's *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*,<sup>72</sup> politics is about the allocation and distribution of scarce resources. The experience of China and the other riparian states of the Mekong and the Brahmaputra in managing their shared

68. Holslag, 'Assessing the Sino–Indian water dispute', p. 25.

69. Li Ling, *Xizang zhi shui jiu Zhongguo [Tibet's Waters Will Save China]* (Beijing: Zhongguo Chang'an Chu Ban She, 2005).

70. Holslag, 'Assessing the Sino–Indian water dispute'.

71. *Ibid.*

72. Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (NY: P. Smith, 1950).



water resources clearly illustrates this point. The problems that China and its neighbors face in managing transboundary rivers are not unique however. With few exceptions, collective action or joint management of shared river basins around the world has proven to be difficult. Studies by John Waterbury on the Nile River Basin illustrate the problem of collective action among the ten riparian states.<sup>73</sup> In areas where the broader relations among riparians are historically conflictive and where water resources are scarce, management of shared water resources is particularly contentious. Collective action is also made more difficult when there is a large number of domestic actors involved and when their interests do not align.

David Kang's hierarchical stability argument does not take into account the rise of India and the overlapping spheres of influence between India and China.<sup>74</sup> Although the jury is still out on whether there is likely to be more cooperation or conflict between the two rising powers in the future, in the intervening period, while both countries are endeavoring to concretize their dreams of past national greatness, uncertainty and ambivalence will continue to characterize their interactions. To ensure that the scales will tip towards stability in the region, it would be helpful for South Asian states to increase their engagement with China.

In the Mekong and the Brahmaputra specifically, where the lack of an independent transboundary river policy on China's part increases the potential for conflict, all riparian states should increase cooperation and joint development. In the Mekong region, there is more room for strengthening multilateral cooperation. Since China is willing to collaborate in the GMS context, co-riparian states should seek to strengthen regional cooperation on water issues, even if that would mean shifting some of the MRC competencies to the ADB and GMS.<sup>75</sup> In the case of the Brahmaputra, multilateral cooperation at present appears to be a non-starter. However, states can work towards increasing bilateral cooperation. China and India are capable of overcoming their historical animosity when their common interests are at stake, as demonstrated by their solidarity in international climate change negotiations which has marginalized the EU and frustrated the US' leadership ambitions.<sup>76</sup> Bilateral joint development is a useful platform for enhancing cooperation with China and provides an avenue for boosting trust and confidence levels. It is economic in nature and attractive for governments eager to exploit the natural resources of the river for the benefit of their people along the border. It would be an attractive option for China, whose main motivation is economic growth, in particular for its poor western region. In the long run, riparian states of the Mekong and the Brahmaputra should work towards some form of water sharing agreement with China at least bilaterally, if not multilaterally.

In managing China, it is also useful to think in power politics terms. While the uneven distribution of power between China and its smaller neighbors in the Mekong

73. John Waterbury, *The Nile Basin: National Determinants of Collective Action* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

74. Kang, 'Hierarchy and stability in the Asia Pacific'.

75. Timo Menniken, 'China's performance in international resource politics: lesson from the Mekong', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 29(1), (2007), p. 111.

76. Fuzuo Wu, 'Sino-Indian climate cooperation: implications for the international climate change regime', *Journal of Contemporary China* 21(77), (September 2012), p. 841.



allows China to appear benign and more generous in its attitude towards them, it also means that the smaller co-riparian states on their own have few resources to induce greater Chinese cooperation. If the power asymmetry increases over time, China can become less cooperative on issues that may affect the long-term economic growth of lower riparian states. With the exception of Thailand, China's neighbors have been largely silent about the impact of China's dams. China's economic weight partially accounts for the silence. For instance, with China now the major financial patron of Cambodia,<sup>77</sup> Prime Minister Hun Sen has specifically banned any criticism or public deliberation about the risks of Chinese dams to Cambodia's Tonlé Sap Lake.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the extent to which these states are able to protest the impact of Chinese dams is limited by their own interest in building dams on the Mekong and their reliance on Chinese aid and investment for these projects. The lower Mekong riparian states have not presented a united front towards China, due to the disagreements between upstream and downstream users throughout the Mekong and conflicts among them over one another's dam building activities. To balance China's riparian dominance, lower riparian states need to be more cohesive and present a common position. While vitriolic accusations will be counter-productive, lower riparian states should not remain silent either. They should adopt and adhere to a common policy with respect to the kind of responsibilities they expect China to bear as upper riparian, and to make it more palatable for the Chinese, spell out their own obligations as lower riparian states. Apart from the GMS and MRC, ASEAN plus Three is another platform that Indochinese states can leverage upon to focus attention on the Mekong issue. While the US Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) is a step in the right direction to encourage greater collaboration in the Mekong area, it needs to dispel Chinese suspicions that the LMI is targeted at China, for instance, by persuading China to be an observer of the LMI.

In addition to adopting a common stance, riparian states of the Mekong and the Brahmaputra can also seek to establish norms and codes of conduct in managing the river basins. Although the 2002 Declaration on the South China Sea Code of Conduct has provided limited efficacy in resolving disputes between China and the other claimants of the Spratlys, it has until recently helped maintained stability and provided a framework and guidelines for claimants. The latest developments in the South China Sea dispute suggest that a more robust mechanism is needed in order for equanimity to prevail in the South China Sea. However, in the case of the Mekong and the Brahmaputra, which is at present significantly less explosive than the South China Sea dispute, a code of conduct for managing international river basins is a worthy goal to work towards. Riparian states should leverage on China's willingness in recent years to abide by internationally accepted norms of behavior.

77. For instance, in 2009, China signed US\$1.2 billion worth of investments and aid agreements with Cambodia; available at: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4b89e260-e7ec-11df-b158-00144feab49a.html#axzz1c5ciKM3Q>.

78. Dore *et al.*, 'China's energy reforms and hydropower expansion in Yunnan', p. 80.