

# A Crisis to Come? China, India, and Water Rivalry

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## Summary

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China's unique status as the source of transboundary river flows to the largest number of countries in the world and its water disputes with virtually all riparian neighbors has serious implications for its major south-westerly neighbor, India. Both China and India are major rising powers; both states have exhibited high rates of economic growth; and both states are heavily reliant on natural resources—especially water—for their sustained development. China's control over the source of major Indian rivers, its construction of mega-dams, its ambitious water management plans, and its rejection of institutionalized water-sharing cooperation creates a potential for serious conflict with India. How can a Sino-Indian water war be averted as China seeks to disturb the status quo on international river flows?

Brahma Chellaney, professor of strategic studies at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, and author of *Water: Asia's New Battleground* (Georgetown University Press, September 2011), discussed tensions that could result from China's control over important water sources. Ashley J. Tellis moderated the discussion.

## China as Hydro-Hegemon

Chellaney described several ways that China has acted as a hydro-hegemon:

- **Headwaters:** China is the largest source of transboundary river flows, including many, such as the Brahmaputra River, that flow from the Tibetan Plateau to much of South Asia.
- **Dams:** No country in history has built more dams than China, and it has built more dams than the rest of the world combined.

- **Environmental practice:** China's use of rivers has been ecologically unsafe, which has had devastating consequences for the environment.

## Increasing Tensions Over Water

- **Dams:** Having saturated its internal rivers with dams, China is increasingly orienting its dam building toward rivers that flow out from China into neighboring countries, Chellaney said.
- **Unilateral approach:** China has increasingly taken a unilateralist approach to its use of rivers and its dam construction, Chellaney noted, as shown by its unwillingness to consult with other countries about how a new dam might affect them.
- **Water agreements:** While Chinese participation is critical to establishing any multinational water management institutions, Beijing has eschewed any sort of legally binding commitment on water and refused to address its neighbors' concerns, Chellaney observed. While almost all of China's neighbors have water agreements among themselves, not one has a water agreement with China. Unsurprisingly, Chellaney added, China is involved in water disputes with almost all of its neighbors, including friendly states such as North Korea and Pakistan.

## China and India: Potential for Conflict

- **Brahmaputra River:** After many years of denying plans to build a mega-dam on the Brahmaputra River, one of the major rivers in Asia, China recently announced plans to begin construction, Chellaney said. This river is one of India's and Bangladesh's largest sources of water, and any water diversions could be devastating to both countries.

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- **Territorial dispute:** Moreover, Chellaney added, the Brahmaputra River supplies water to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which is China's largest territorial dispute. He warned that there is a significant possibility of security tensions and the politicization of water if China's dam building plans go through.

Tellis noted that while the water issue remains extremely important, it transcends traditional security disputes between states. He argued that its significance stems from the fact that transboundary water problems lay at the interstice of several larger regional and international issues, including climate change, the character of the international order, and the preferences and actions of states themselves.

Tellis further added that if water was a purely private resource, then reliance on markets would provide adequate solutions in principle; however, since river flows cross borders and are not privately-owned, there is a need for institutions to assure equitable and practical solutions to any riparian rivalry. Chellaney concurred, adding that although there is a desperate need for China to respect the water-sharing status quo, a united front of China's downstream neighbors is extremely unlikely due to internecine fighting between the downstream states over their own water issues. Both Chellaney and Tellis warned that the water conflict between China and its neighbors has real national security implications, and that it is a problem that will only become worse.

*This event is the first in the "China and India: Rising Powers, Rising Risks?" series, supported by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation. The next will be "China and India: How to Recognize Rivalry" on September 26th.*

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