

Executive Summary

The Brahmaputra River, which originates in China and runs through India and Bangladesh, raises serious concerns for regional stability. China and India have fought a war over contested territory through which the Brahmaputra flows, while Bangladesh faces human security pressures in this basin that will be magnified by upstream river practices. Despite potential threats to regional stability from dam-building activities and water diversion plans on shared resources, no bilateral or multilateral water management accord exists in the Brahmaputra River basin. Moreover, this basin has received little scholarly attention compared with other river basins such as the Ganges and Indus. As a result, CNA undertook a study to gain an understanding of the equities and challenges over Brahmaputra resources at the bilateral and domestic levels in order to consider the possibilities for greater cooperation across the basin.

We find that upper riparians China and India are more concerned about the basin in political terms, whereas lowest riparian Bangladesh is primarily concerned about the basin in physical terms. While current water cooperation in this basin is limited and each riparian has its own domestic considerations, there are ways to pursue positive interactions in the Brahmaputra basin at the bilateral and even multilateral levels. In fact, because there are no interstate or water-related crises at present, the moment is opportune for China, India, and Bangladesh to work cooperatively to prevent future problems. Appealing to the shared interests of the three countries—such as economic integration and development of the basin—will be more effective for multilateral cooperation than focusing on the narrow lens of water-sharing.

Bilateral relations

China and India are engaged in a border dispute over Indian-administered Arunachal Pradesh, which Beijing regards as “southern Tibet.” The Brahmaputra River runs through this disputed territory. While India’s concerns are evident as a lower riparian with a border dispute, China surprisingly also has concerns despite being upriver of India. Bangladesh does not have territorial disputes with India but still fears the ramifications of poor water management by its upstream neighbors, especially India.

- China has concerns that India’s dam-building activities downstream could further strengthen New Delhi’s “actual control” over Arunachal Pradesh. This

issue could complicate border negotiations and further reduce Beijing's hopes of recovering this territory.

- As the middle riparian in the basin, India faces threats from upper riparian China and poses challenges to lower riparian Bangladesh. India perceives political threats from China because of Beijing's claim to part of the territory where the Brahmaputra River runs and therefore seeks to establish user rights to the river waters. India also faces physical challenges from China's upstream activities such as its robust dam-building program and possible implementation of a water diversion project.
- Bangladesh has the most to lose from water diversion activities and poor river management by upper riparian states. Bangladesh's relations with neighboring India are the more complicated of its two bilateral relationships on the Brahmaputra.

Domestic considerations

Each riparian has national priorities with regard to the Brahmaputra. Whereas China finds value in it for hydropower generation, Bangladesh's main domestic challenges encompass managing the physical impacts of the river. India's considerations reflect a combination of these interests as well as a desire to promote domestic integration.

- Upper riparian China prioritizes harnessing the Brahmaputra's economic and energy opportunities, such as the generation of hydropower to develop its western regions and to invest in clean energy resources. China has built one hydropower dam on the river and has plans for several more. In the near to medium term, China is unlikely to pursue plans to divert the Brahmaputra to relieve domestic water shortages—which is a concern for Indian observers—given cost and logistical concerns.
- India's main domestic considerations are the management of and access to Brahmaputra waters for hydroelectricity, flood control, local development, and integration of isolated northeast India into the rest of the country. India's northeast states, primarily concerned about physical impacts of the river, differ among themselves and with the central government—further exacerbating India's threat perceptions and policy quandaries.
- While Bangladesh's greatest potential threat from the Brahmaputra comes from the outside, the country's most immediate challenges on this river exist within its borders. These challenges are primarily riverbank erosion, floods, and diminished water flow and groundwater availability in the dry season. The

country's capacity constraints, dense population, and dependence on external water sources exacerbate Bangladesh's Brahmaputra-specific challenges.

Prospects for multilateral cooperation

The three riparians have taken modest steps at the bilateral level to cooperate in the Brahmaputra basin, such as limited water data-sharing and government dialogues between technical experts. Multiple options exist to expand cooperation across the basin. Bangladesh is most favorably disposed to multilateral cooperation, while China and India are cautious and selective.

- Bangladesh is the strongest advocate for basin-wide management of the Brahmaputra, given the cumulative impacts of activities by its upper riparian neighbors and Dhaka's limited capacity to address internal challenges.
- China and India have shown marginal interest thus far in addressing water resource management at a multilateral level given both countries' preferences for bilateralism. Yet neither is opposed. There are precedents and space for New Delhi and Beijing to experiment with pursuing innovative approaches to the Brahmaputra with its neighbors.
- Opportunities to expand cooperation at the multilateral level include 1) technical exchanges on the development of hydrological tools, disaster management, and pollution control and 2) confidence-building activities through official and unofficial dialogues, especially by international organizations and extraregional governments.

The only regional, multilateral framework where the three Brahmaputra riparians are members of equal status is the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) initiative. BCIM seeks to expand regional connectivity, such as through investments in infrastructure and resources. This established framework provides a built-in opportunity to cooperate on Brahmaputra issues.

- The BCIM Economic Corridor is the most promising existing framework for multilateral cooperation on the Brahmaputra. All three basin countries studied in this report are equal members of BCIM and are formally committed to pursuing greater regional integration through the BCIM Economic Corridor.
- Beginning cooperative efforts on water resources (e.g., through bilateral accords, trilateral consultations, and even a multilateral memorandum of understanding) could pave the way for a new entity—possibly a Brahmaputra Basin Commission—through which a water management and development accord could be designed and implemented.