Nepal's Water Diplomacy: Relationship with her Neighbours

Dwarika Nath Dhungel*

Abstract

Water is the most important natural resource of Nepal. Its importance and demand have been increasing over time, not only in Nepal but also in all of the South Asia region. The Ganges River Basin is the most populous region in the world. People living in and around the Basin rely mainly on the Ganges River to meet their growing water requirements. However, the Ganges River is mostly fed by the rivers that originate in Nepal and Tibet Autonomous Region of China. This paper explores the possibility of Nepal using water as a driver for the development of the region as part of its regional diplomacy.

Context

Fundamental or guiding principles Nepal's foreign policy/ diplomacy have been to enhance the dignity of the nation in the world community 'based on sovereign equality while safeguarding the freedom, sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence, and national interest of Nepal (Constitution of Nepal, 2015, Article 50.4). Furthermore, as per State Policy enshrined in the Constitution of Nepal, 2015 the foreign policy of the country would be conducted on the based charter of the United Nations, non-alignment, principles of *Panchsheel*, international law, and the norms of world peace, taking into consideration of the overall interest of the nation, while remaining active in safeguarding the sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence and national interest of Nepal' (Ibid. Article 51: Ta). Based on these constitutional provisions, the then Government of Nepal adopted a new Foreign Policy of Nepal, 2077 on October 20, 2020.

The policy aims at promoting and strengthening bilateral ties with the neighboring and all other countries based on sovereign equality, mutual benefits, and respect, promotion of national interests by increasing Nepal's identity and representation in the international and regional forums...' (Bhandary, 2020). It also has 'emphasized a constructive and active role in regional and sub-regional forums... like SAARC and BIMSTEC and...to take advantage of the both by making South Asia and

* Prf. Dr. Dhungel is a Former Secretry of Nepal and Life Member of NCWA.

Southeast Asia *economically and socially connected* (Ibid)**.** The inclusion of these elements in managing the foreign policy of the country means that the country wants to pursue economic/ development diplomacy in the days to come. In other words, the policy emphasizes the pursuit of economic diplomacy. Expecting that the current government (government of the day in 2023) headed by Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' would give continuity to the foreign policy adopted by the last government, especially its emphasis on the economic / development diplomacy in the international forum and regional forums, such as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), The Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative (BBIN) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Water is the most important natural resource that possesses. Its importance is increasing day by day as it is increasingly becoming a scarce resource. Although stated in a different context, the current US Vice President Kamala Harris is correct in her statement that *war for water is looming*. To quote her: 'For years there were wars fought over oil; in a short time, there will be wars fought over water ... We must address inequities in access to clean water, at local, state federal levels' (Vice President Kamala Harris Warns Of Looming 'Wars Fought Over Water' - CBS San Francisco (cbsnews.com).

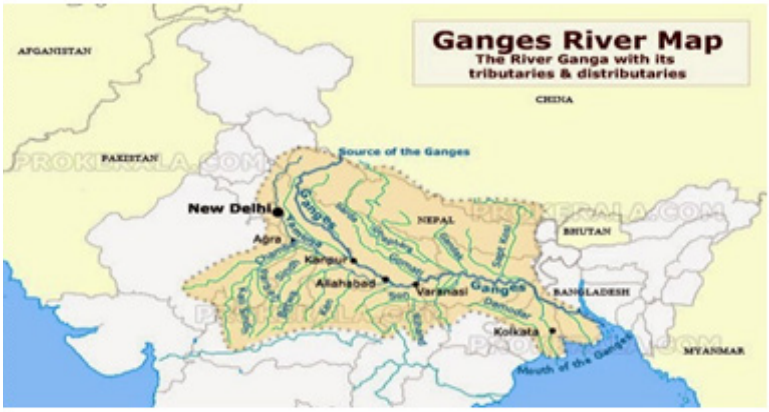
In light of the growing importance of water in the days to come and it is the most important natural resource of the country, its efficient and optimal use would not only improve the livelihood of the people of Nepal 'but also substantially contribute to the growing water requirements of the countries in the Ganga basin...' (Dhungel and Pun, 2009, p.ix). Therefore, water has to be or going to be a major element of Nepal's economic/ development diplomacy, especially about her South Asian neighbors and beyond as she is also a member of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

In this paper, I intend to deal primarily with Nepal's economic/development diplomacy in the context of her water resource relationship with her neighbors, especially the countries of the Ganga Basin. Also, in the context of her membership to the BIMSTEC, matters related to the Brahmaputra and Meghna River basins would be touched upon.

Ganga Basin and Contribution of Water flowing from Nepal to the Mighty Ganga River

The Ganga Basin forms part of the greater Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basins. Four countries, the Tibetan Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (TAR/PRC), Nepal, India, and Bangladesh belong to the Ganga Basin countries. This

mighty River is fed by some rivers that originate in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (TAR/PRC), rivers of Nepal, and some Indian rivers. 'The most widely accepted length of the Ganges River is 1,569 miles (2,525 km), and its drainage basin is estimated to be about 416,990 square miles (1,080,000 sq. km)' (https://www.thoughtco.com/ganges-river-and-geography-1434474) (Map). The Ganges River basin is home to more than 655 million people (The World Bank, 2014, p.1), excluding the population of the TAR/PRC. It is the most populous river basin in the world (https://www.britannica.com/place/Ganges-River). People living in the basin rely on the Ganges for their daily needs such as drinking water supplies and food as well as for irrigation and manufacturing. The main branch of the river flows down to the Bay of Bengal through Bangladesh. As such, it is a transboundary river between India and Bangladesh.

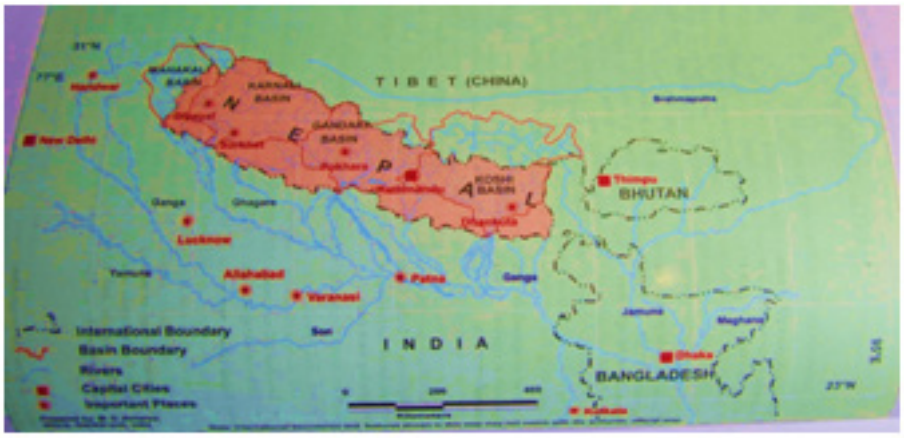


Note. The map of Nepal shown in this Ganges River Map does not tally with the new map published by the Government of Nepal in 2020

Source: https://educationworldscan.blogspot.com/2014/06/holy-river-ganges.html

Nepal is endowed with more than 6,000 rivers with a combined run-off of about 220 billion cubic meters with an average annual precipitation of 1530 mm (WECS, 2002, p.8). In addition, she also has 'extensive groundwater resources' (Ibid), mainly in the Tarai area (southern part of the country) and in some mid-hill valleys like Kathmandu and Dang. The Ganges is the natural drainage of all the rivers originating within or flowing through Nepal. The overall contribution of the rivers of Nepal is 47 percent of its flow and it is as high as 75 percent during the dry months (February/March/April) of the Ganges flows at Farakka (Pun 2004, P.7). As a contributor to its waters, Nepal is, thus, linked to Bangladesh through this mighty river.

Regional Context of Nepal's Major River Basins



Note: This map is the older version and does not tally with the new map published by the Government of Nepal in 2020

Source: His Majesty's Government of Nepal, Water and Energy Commission Secretariat (WECS). Water Resources Strategy, 2002

Nepal's Offer for Regional Cooperation and Responses

In addition to her vast water resources, Nepal has suitable sites for large storage projects capable of holding seventy-seven (77) billion cubic meters of water, constituting about 68 percent of the total monsoon flow, which, as per Nepal's water resource expert Som Nath Poudel, if ever implemented, will a very effective role in meeting riparian irrigation demands, partially mitigating floods, generating a colossal quantity of hydro-electricity, and connecting inland river navigation with the sea' (Poudel 2009, P.109).

Since the 1970s, Nepal has been proposing the promotion of regional-level cooperation in the water sector in different fora and also at the Track II level meetings and discussions.

Nepal, for the first time, during the 26th Colombo Plan Consultative Meeting held in Kathmandu in 1977 and at the first summit of the Heads of State or Government of Association of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) held in Dhaka in 1985, had floated the idea and emphasized the need for regional cooperation in the field of water resource (Lohani, 2013). It was the late King Birendra who had proposed regional cooperation in this sector (water sector) at both these events (IFA, 2010). Responding to the proposal of Birendra, the Prime Minister of India, (Rajiv Gandhi) had said that 'we have not sought to melt our

bilateral relationship into a common regional identity, but rather to fit South Asian cooperation in our respective foreign policies as an additional dimension' (quoted in Upadhyay 2013, p. 256). Whereas Bangladesh had supported 'the offer of Nepal and mentioned it as a positive move' (Ibid), interestingly, support coming from Bangladesh was considered or seen as a 'ganging up by Nepal and Bangladesh against India' by an influential former Indian diplomat, Maharaja Krishna Rasgotra (ORF, 2004, p. 169).

The World Bank initiated a study on the *Ganges Strategic Basin Assessment* states that 'all countries in the basin benefit from the Ganges and suffer from its extremes; all could benefit more and suffer less. Benefits from potential hydropower development and agricultural modernization remain untapped, while flood and drought management systems are inadequate to protect lives and livelihoods. To better manage the Ganges – to sustain the river ecosystem, capture its potential benefits, and mitigate its mounting costs – requires enhanced regional knowledge and cooperation' (The World Bank, 2014, p. XIII). But the issue as per the study report is that 'currently, most development in the basin is through incremental, project-by-project activities within each of the riparian countries. There has been surprisingly little systematic regional research on the basin's development options and challenges using modern analytical tools that go beyond sector, country, or state analysis to examine the system-wide strategic questions that the basin faces' (The World Bank, 2014, p. XIII**).**

So the report suggests that 'four areas stand out as opportunities for action - (1) development of cooperative basin-wide information systems and institutions; (2) flood management using both hard and soft techniques; (3) hydropower development and trade; and (4) groundwater development for irrigation' (The World Bank, 2014).

Ever since Bangladesh supported Nepal's proposal for cooperation in the water sector at the regional level, she has been pursuing a consistent policy about water relationships with the neighboring countries. Her National Water Policy of 1999 emphasized the need for entering 'into agreements with co-riparian countries for sharing the waters of international rivers, data exchange, resource planning and long-term management of water resources under normal and emergency conditions of flood, drought and water pollution' (p.4). Also, among other things, it further emphasizes the need for working jointly 'with co-riparian countries to harness, develop, and share the water resources of the international rivers to mitigate floods and augment flows of water during the dry season' (p.5).

The Water Resources Strategy of Nepal (2002) and the National Water Plan of Nepal 2005 have also talked about the importance of regional cooperation among

the Ganga basin countries in the water resources sector. Nepal's *National Water Resources Policy,* 2077 BS, also talks about the international rivers, it states that the country would deal with and manage the international dimension of water resources to gain optimum benefit (p.4).

Of the Ganga-basin countries, India is a major player. In other words, the type of policy she adopts has greater implications for the water relationship among the Ganga basin countries. She has been pursuing a policy of bilateralism. In other words, about her water resources relationship with neighboring countries on transboundary rivers India's National Water Policy of 2012, as she is yet to come up with a new water policy, clearly states that India would enter into 'international agreements with neighboring countries on a bilateral basis for the exchange of hydrological data of international rivers on near real-time basis' (pp.11-12). Also, she would negotiate on a bilateral basis 'sharing and management of water of international rivers…keeping paramount the national interest' (Government of India, 2012, p.12). But lately, India seems to be changing her thinking on the water-related issue with her neighbors, i.e. moving towards cooperating with the neighbors at the river basin level.

From the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) via South Asian Growth Quadrangle (BBIN)

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established on 8th December 1985 with such objectives as, among other things, promoting the welfare of the peoples of South Asia, contributing mutual trust, and promoting collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical, and scientific fields. One of the areas identified by the member countries for cooperation related to water is Energy, which has been lumped under the heading - Energy, Transport, Science, and Technology (http://saarc-sec.org/areas_of_cooperation/area_detail/energy-transport-science-and-technology/click-for-details_10). Also, there exists a SAARC Framework Agreement on Energy Cooperation (Electricity), 2014. This framework provides the basis for the SAARC countries to engage in energy (electricity) cooperation**.** But, first of all, the framework is yet to come into force as only four of the eight countries - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal – have so far ratified it (Ibid). Secondly, its success largely depends upon the relationship between the two large member countries – India and Pakistan. The mainly obvious reason, i.e., the strained relationship between India and Pakistan, the SAARC framework on energy has remained on paper only.

The relationship between the two countries has not only impacted the implementation

of the framework on energy, but also the success of the SAARC itself. Thus, based on the state of the relationship that exists between India and Pakistan, it is clear that the South Asian countries have to travel a long way in having fruitful cooperation among themselves in all sectors including water and energy. And so long as the relationship between these two countries remains strained, the SAARC in general, and its framework on energy, in particular, are not going to bear fruits. Furthermore, the SAARC has become almost dysfunctional, although one could argue it (SAARC) has not yet lost its significance.

In the meantime, the idea of Sub-regional cooperation has also got developed and a framework has been created. The idea of sub-regional level grouping and cooperation in the form of the 'growth triangle within South Asia, to remind the readers, was first discussed and agreed upon in May 1996 during the meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers in New Delhi. A follow-up, in December 1996, Nepal formally proposed to form a South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) consisting of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal [BBIN]…during the SAARC Foreign Ministers' Conference. The proposal got instantly approved by all the concerned countries (Sukla, 2019, p. 2). And it was finally approved at the Ninth SAARC Summit held in May 1997 in Male, Maldives (Karim and Balaji, 2016, p.5).

The South Asia Growth Quadrangle/BBIN was launched, with a view to, among other goals to be achieved, 'create an enabling environment for accelerating economic growth' among the member countries (https://aric.adb.org/initiative/south-asia-growth-quadrangle and https://aric.adb.org/initiative/south-asia-subregional-economic-cooperation-initiative). But it had not been able to make any headway due to many reasons. One of the most important reasons is fear, on the part of the member countries of being dominated by India. But most importantly, regarding the water resources relationship, India was more interested to pursue the policy of bilateralism with her neighbors. Trying to provide the rationale for the adoption of such a policy by India, Karim and Balaji have written (2016) that 'it was important that there should first exist at least three sets of strong and good bilateral relations between contiguously located neighboring states. While excellent bilateral relations existed between Bangladesh and Bhutan and between Bhutan and India, relations between Bangladesh and India in the years before 2008 had hit a new nadir.

Getting bilateral relations right between these two countries, therefore, assumed critical importance. Both countries set about in real earnest to reset and reconfigure their bilateral relations. Between 2010-2011 Prime Ministers of the two countries exchanged visits to each other's countries; the long-festering (since 1974) land boundary agreement and its protocol that would operationalize it was signed as a

game-changing Framework Agreement for Cooperation and Development (FACD) in September 2011' (pp. 5-6) The latter actioned on both countries to take initiatives together to promote regional and sub-regional cooperation by drawing other countries of the region into collaborative engagements in various sectors, most importantly important activity, investment, energy, and water basin management sectors' (Ibid). Only after the signing of the FACD in 2011, as Karim and Balaji think the importance of BBIN was being emphasized.

Also, based on the contents of the joint statement issued at the end of the state visit of Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to India in 2017, one could argue that India has shifted its policy on water resources relationship with her neighboring countries. Although she has yet to come up with a new water policy, what caused India to change her policy of bilateralism to work through the BBIN in the water sector, needed to be explored. The South-North Water Transfer Project of China and her decision to go ahead with the construction of a new run of river-type hydropower projects on the Brahmaputra River (known as Yarlung Zangbo in the TAR/PRC) under the new energy development plan of 2015 (The *Times of India,* Jan. 30, 2013, and *Business Line,* the *Hindu,* March 28, 2013), seemed to have hastened or compelled India to change her water relation policy with neighboring countries, especially with Nepal and Bangladesh. The signal of the policy shift had been indicated by the *Hindu* daily in its April 15, 2013 issue. From this perspective, one could argue that India now wants to join hands with her neighboring countries through BBIN to improve her bargaining power with China about the waters of Brahmaputra.

The BBIN operates 'through inter-governmental Joint Working Groups (JWG) comprising senior officials of respective governments, under the aegis of their respective foreign affairs ministries but drawing in representatives of other concerned ministries/agencies of the government. Two such JWGs were set up, one on Trade, Connectivity, and Transit, the other on Water Resources Management, and Power/hydropower trade and Grid Connectivity' (Karim and Balaji, 2016, P.6). The third meeting of its JWGs, including that of the water resources, was held in Dhaka between 19 and 20, 2016. The JWG on water resources had decided that ' an Experts Group (EG) would be constituted for exchanging best practices in water resources management and on specifics of the identified projects, power trade, inter grid connectivity, flood forecasting and other areas of possible cooperation (BBIN 3rd JWG meeting on Sub-Regional Cooperation held in Dhaka (Press Release) - nepalforeignaffairs.com)and BBIN cooperation on water, power, connectivity carried forward | Business Standard News (business-standard.com).

Since 2016, there has been neither meeting of JWG on water resources nor any information about the formation of its expert group (EG) available. Thus, from the point of view of water resources and energy cooperation among its member countries, it (BBIN) is in a state of limbo. However, some studies on energy cooperation in this region have been undertaken by some institutions. For example *Centre for International Trade, Economics & Environment (CUTS CITEE)'s study entitled* Energy Cooperation in the BBIN Region of 2022 (Energy Cooperation in the BBIN Region | Welcome to CUTS CITEE (cuts-citee.org). Similarly Integrated Research and Action for Development (IRADe)'s study on Cross Border Electricity trade with specific reference to India and its neighbors, namely, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal under the South Asia Regional Initiative for Energy Integration [SARI/EI] (Cross Border Electricity Trade | USAID SARI/Energy Integration (sari-energy.org) could also be cited as another example.

On the one hand, energy cooperation at the BBIN level, except for some studies, is yet to take off the ground; on the other hand, Nepal, during Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's visit to India in April 2022, through a joint press briefing along with PM Narendra Modi, announced a vision statement. As per this statement both sides have agreed to work on '(a) joint development of power generation projects in Nepal, (b) development of cross-border transmission infrastructure, (c) bi-directional power trade with appropriate access to electricity markets in both countries based on mutual benefits, market demand and applicable domestic regulations of each country, (d) coordinated operation of the national grids and (e) institutional cooperation in sharing latest operational information, technology, and know-how'. (MEA | Statements: Bilateral/Multilateral Documents and India-Nepal Joint Vision Statement on Power Sector Cooperation (Narendra Modi. in). In addition, they agreed **'**to include their partner countries under the BBIN framework (https://tkpo.st/3wVeN6g).

In addition, during the secretary-level Joint Steering Committee (JSC) meeting on energy cooperation between Nepal and Bangladesh held at Kathmandu in August 2022, the Nepal Electricity Authority and the Bangladesh Power Development Board decided to request India's NTPC Vidyut Vyapar Nigam (NVVN) *for a trilateral energy sales and purchase agreement***.** They planned to trade power using the Baharampur-Bheramara cross-border power transmission line, which links India and Bangladesh. It was also decided to request India to allow Nepal to export 40-50 MW of electricity to Bangladesh in the initial phase. In line with the decision made in Kathmandu, Bangladesh raised the issue at the highest level in New Delhi during the last week of September 2022 (Tripartite deal needed to import power to BD from Nepal via India observerbd.com and Power Corridor: A New Dimension

Of India-Bangladesh Relations And Energy Security – OpEd – Eurasia Review). In other words, during her visit to India from 05-08 September 2022, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh requested India to allow its infrastructure to import power from Nepal and Bhutan. 'The Indian side informed that the guidelines for the same are already in place in India' (India - Bangladesh Joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India (mea.gov.in). Indeed, *India's Guidelines for Import/Export (Cross Border) of Electricity, 2018* contains a provision that makes it possible for Bangladesh to import power from Nepal through the use of Indian infrastructure, for which there has to be a tripartite agreement amongst them, which has to have the approval of the Government of India. To implement the provisions of the guidelines, an operational procedure has been approved by the Government of India in February 2021. The procedure has a restrictive provision, i.e. Section 8.2 (b), based on which the Government of India could use discretionary power while deciding whether or not to allow the use of the Indian infrastructure for the export of power from Nepal to Bangladesh by taking into account the source of funds that is invested to generate power from a hydropower project. In other words, it would not be easy for Nepal to export power to Bangladesh from those hydropower generating stations in which there is an investment of the third party, especially those of the Chinese government/firms.

While BBIN, on the one hand, is in a state of limbo and the 2021 procedure approved by the Government of India has some restrictive provisions, India, on the other hand, has shown its interest to look toward the east and, for this purpose, to use the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as another vehicle for regional cooperation.

BIMSTEC is a sector-driven grouping organization. Energy is one of the areas in which BMISTEC has focused its attention (History – Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and this sector, from among its member countries, is led by Myanmar. Its energy center is to be established in Bengaluru in India. In addition, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the establishment of the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection had been signed on 31 August 2018 at the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu, Nepal (Salient Facts on BIMSTEC Energy Cooperation – Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)**.**

At the end of the third BIMSTEC Energy Ministers' virtual meeting, which was coordinated by Nepal on 20th April 2022, Ministers, among other things, directed the 'Expert Group on Energy to develop a Comprehensive Plan for Energy Cooperation

on how the energy trade should be conducted among the BIMSTEC Member States. The meeting also directed the preparation for the establishment of the BIMSTEC Energy Centre (BEC) to act as a center of excellence in research and sharing of experience to strengthen cooperation in the energy sector among BIMSTEC Member States. Regarding the MOU on Grid Interconnection 2018, ministers approved the establishment of the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Coordination Committee (BGICC); its Terms of Reference (ToR) to get the MoU provisions implemented; and directed the BGICC to conclude the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Master Plan Study with the support of Asian Development Bank at the earliest (BIMSTEC Energy Ministers adopt Joint Statement calling for accelerating Energy Cooperation in the region – Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

The success of BIMSTEC's effort in the energy sector, especially the interest of Bangladesh to work with Nepal in this sector, largely depends upon the attitude of India. Regarding the attitude of India toward electrical power trading with and among neighboring countries, procedures approved by the Government of India in September 2021 may look liberal (India introduces a procedure that will allow Nepal to export power to it (kathmandupost.com [18th October 2022‡), but, as already indicated above, it is restrictive. If not, the provision related to verifying ownership of the electrical power generating station would not have been included in the procedure 2021.

Whether or not India will do away with restrictive provisions from the 2018 and 2021 documents time will tell. Therefore, we will have to wait for some years to judge whether or not BIMSTEC would also be a useful mechanism for promoting electrical power trade among BIMSTEC countries, including the export of hydropower from Nepal to Bangladesh through India.

Tibetan Autonomous Region of Peoples the Republic of China as a part of Ganga- Brahmaputra Basins

Normally we forget China during the Ganga-Brahmaputra basin-related discussions. Some even doubt if there was a need for including the People's Republic of China (PRC) on board in the discussions on Ganga basin-related matters. But I think its inclusion in the discussions is essential. Because, firstly the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of the PRC forms part of the basin, as 3.08 percent of its territory falls under the Ganga Basin (Table 1). Secondly, India herself has raised concerns about developments in the Brahmaputra River and China's basin transfer schemes. She is worried about possible 'devastation in India's north-eastern…either with floods or reduced water flow' (https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-

nation/why-india-is-worried-about-chinas-dam-projects-on-the-brahmaputra-river/articleshow/54691589.cms).In other words, India and another lower riparian country, Bangladesh, rely on Brahmaputra's water for agriculture purposes (Neeraj Manhas and Hari Yadav G, 2022: Relooking India-China Water Relations: A Major Concern? | The Financial Express). In such a context, both India and Bangladesh would be badly affected if China goes on building dams 'across the region and water division plans along the Brahmaputra region' (Ibid). It would also create 'tension if Beijing diverts stormwater in times of political crisis' (Ibid). In this regard, India's Strategic Affairs Expert, Brahma Chellaney, thinks that 'the issue between India and China is that there is no understanding, no agreements on international rivers (Quoted in Manhas and Yadav, 2022)

It may be added that there exists hydrological data sharing MoU as well as the Expert Level Mechanism (ELM) between India and China to share the hydrological data of Brahmaputra River (Yarlong Zangbo) and Sutlej River (Langqen Zangbo) during the flood seasons (China to resume sharing hydrological data with India on Brahmaputra | India.com). But such an arrangement, experts think, is not sufficient there is a need for some sort of agreement or joint declaration between the two countries on international rivers (Neeraj Singh Manhas and Hari Yadav G, 2022: Relooking India-China Water Relations: A Major Concern? | The Financial Express).

In addition to the call for some sort of agreement with the PRC on Brahmaputra, former Water Resources Secretary of India, Ramaswamy R. Iyer draws our attention towards India's inconsistent policy about its thinking about rivers. On the one hand, according to him, India is concerned with the Chinese interventions on the Brahmaputra and, on the other, she is herself 'constructing many projects in its territory, giving rise to domestic protest movements' (Ramaswamy R. Iyer: Neighborhood Tensions: India's Trans-Boundary Water Relations > Articles | (globalasia.org). Its interventions in the Brahmaputra would cause alarm in Bangladesh. 'If it is all right for India to go on a project-building spree on the Brahmaputra, with what moral justification can India object to China doing so?' (Ibid). Therefore, 'it is clear that India needs to reconsider its thinking about rivers, and achieve a degree of consistency between what it does internally and what it expects its neighbors to do, and between its behavior toward its downstream neighbors and the behavior that it expects from China' (Ibid).

Way Forward

From the above narratives, it should be clear that the water and energy relationship among Ganga-Brahmaputra basin countries, except for India-Bhutan relations is not congenial. (Ibid). So first of all, the basin countries have to make the optimum use

of existing institutional mechanisms and implementation of bilateral agreements in their letter and spirit. SAARC may have become a dysfunctional organization for, as already indicated elsewhere, obvious reasons. Similarly, from the point of view of actions or implementation of decisions made, both BBIN and BIMSTEC may not have proved to be effective institutions in improving the water and energy relationship among the member countries. But since the countries of the Ganga – Brahmaputra basins are the members of these organizations, these organizations should be made more effective through the pursuit of a regional approach in the real sense in cooperating in the water and energy sector the by basin member countries and, the decisions of made by the BBIN and BIMSTEC should be implemented earnestly by the concerned countries.

The other important facts are that the TAR/PRC, Nepal, India, and Bangladesh are connected by the Ganga River. Likewise, the Brahmaputra River connects TRC/ PRC, India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Therefore, in the context of growing water scarcity to meet increasing water demand in all the countries falling under the Ganga-Brahmaputra Basins, their attention should be on the water, as hydroelectricity is only its product. What is needed is that they should realize its importance and ensure the optimum use of the water available without comprising the right of the future generation over this valuable resource. For this, they should get seriously engaged in the discussion on how best they could cooperate in the water sector so that all the basin countries would be able to be in a win-win situation. In addition, there is also no need for any country from the Ganges/ Ganga and Brahmaputra basins to feel shy to engage and involve PRC in the exercise undertaken by BBIN and BIMSTEC about water resources sector/ cooperation among the Ganga and Brahmaputra River basins.

In addition, what is also needed is the initiation of a series of sensitization programs, such as round table conferences, dialogue, talk shows, etc. for different stakeholders (policymakers, press media, academia, and researchers) of the Ganga-Brahmaputra basin countries about the benefits of cooperation in the water sector. Such sensitization programs could be organized by the academic/research/think tank institutions of the countries falling under the basins or by institutions such Mekong River Commission.

Conclusion

To conclude, TAR/PRC, Nepal, India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh are linked to each other by the two important rivers – the Ganges and the Brahmaputra Rivers. Therefore, it would be desirable for these countries to work closely for the optimum use of the waters of these rivers for the benefit of their people. Since the Meghna

River is also a transboundary river and flows down the sea through Bangladesh, this river should also form the part of water discourse among the Ganga-Brahmaputra River basin countries (TAR/PRC, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Bhutan).

As China is an upper riparian country in both the Ganga and Brahmaputra River basins and India is a main player in the Ganga Basin countries, the attitudes of these two countries would play a very important role in the discussion on the water-related issues among the basin countries of Ganga - Brahmaputra – Meghna River basins. Sooner the better if they change their attitude and do away with the historical legacy for fruitful cooperation in the water sector among the BBIN and BIMSTEC countries falling within the Ganga - Brahmaputra – Meghna River basins.

Nepal as part of the Ganga Basin and as it is also a member of both the BBIN and BIMSTEC, in the exercise of her economic/development diplomacy, could contribute to bringing these two countries together to improve the livelihood of millions of people living in the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna River Basins.

Table 1: Ganga Basin Area Distribution

S.N	Country	Basin Area km2	Percentage of Total Area
1	China (TAR)	33,520	3.08
2	Nepal	147,480	13.56
3	India	860,000	79.10
4	Bangladesh	46,300	4.26
	Total	1,087,300	100

***Source*:** Hari Man Shrestha and Lekh M. Singh, The Ganges-Brahmaputra System: A Nepalese Perspective in the Context of Regional Cooperation, Asian International Waters 1996 (Quoted in Iswor R Onta, Harnessing the Himalayan Waters of Nepal: A Case for Partnership for the Ganges Basin: An Invited Paper for Ganges Forum, Sponsored by IWRA and UN University, Tokyo, March 18-20, 1998, Calcutta).

References

Asia Regional Integration Center. (2023). *Cross-border Infrastructure South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ)*. Retrieved from: https://aric.adb.org/initiative/south-asia-growth-quadrangle and https://aric.adb.org/initiative/south-asia-subregional-economic-cooperation-initiative

Bangladesh Tourism Board. (2023). *Meghna River*. Retrieved from: https://beautifulbangladesh.gov.bd

BIMSTEC. (2011). *Salient Facts on BIMSTEC Energy Cooperation*. Retrieved from: https://bimstec.org/salient-facts-on-bimstec-energy-cooperation/

BIMSTEC. (2022). *Energy Ministers Adopt Joint Statement Calling for Accelerating Energy Cooperation in the Region*. Retrieved February 5, 2023, from BIMSTEC: https://bimstec.org/event/bimstec-energy-ministers-adopt-joint-statement-calling-for-accelerating-energy-cooperation-in-the-region/

Bhandary, S. (2020). *Government Unveils Foreign Policy with Emphasis on Economic Diplomacy*. DCNepal.

Bhushal, R. (2022). *Developers from India Take on Nepal Hydropower Projects.* The Third Pole.

Briney, A. (2019). *Geography of the Ganges River.* Retrieved from Thoughtco: https://www.thoughtco.com/ganges-river-and-geography-1434474)

Business Standard. (2016). *BBIN Cooperation on Water, Power, Connectivity Carried Forward*. Retrieved February 4, 2023, from Business Standard: https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/bbin-cooperation-on-water-power-connectivity-carried-forward-116012201124_1.html

CBS News. (2021). *Vice President Kamala Harris Makes First Bay Area Visit Since Election*. Retrieved from: https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/vice-president-kamala-harris-makes-first-bay-area-visit-since-election/

Central Electricity Authority, Ministry of Power, Government of India. (2021). *Procedure for Approval and Facilitating Import/Export (Cross Border) of Electricity by the Designated Authority. CEA.*

Centre for International Trade, Economics & Environment. (2023). *Moving towards Energy Security through Cross Border Energy Cooperation (CUTS CITEE)*. Retrieved from: https://cuts-citee.org/energy-cooperation-in-the-bbin-region/

Chen, S. (2017). *Chinese Engineers Plan 1000 Km Tunnel to Make Xinjiang Desert Bloom.* Retrieved February 1, 2023, from SCMP: https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2116750/chinese-engineers-plan-1000km-tunnel-make-xinjiang-desert-bloom

Dhungana, N. (2023). *New Government's New Roles on Foreign Policy, Diplomacy, and Economic Development*. Retrieved February 2, 2023, from: https://nepalforeignaffairs.com/new-governments-new-roles-on-foreign-policy-diplomacy-and-economic-development/

Dhungel, D. N. & Santa B. Pun (Eds). (2009). *The Nepal-India Water Resources Relationship: Challenges,* Springer Science+Business Media.

Dhungel, D. N. (2014). Three Decades of SAARC (Some Observations with Specific Reference to Energy Sector. *FPRC Journal*, 4.

Government of Nepal, Ministry of Energy, Water Resources and Irrigation. (2077 B.S.). *National Water Resources Policy*. Kathmandu: GON.

Government of Nepal, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2077 B. S.). *Foreign Policy of Nepal*. Kathmandu: GON.

His Majesty's Government of Nepal, Water and Energy Commission Secretariat. (2002). *Water Resources Strategy Nepal*. Kathmandu: HMG.

His Majesty's Government of Nepal, Water and Energy Commission Secretariat. (2005). *National Water Plan*. Kathmandu: HMG.

India.com. (2018). *China to Resume Sharing Hydrological Data with India on the Brahmaputra.* Retrieved from India.com: https://www.india.com/news/agencies/china-to-resume-sharing-hydrological-data-with-india-on-brahmaputra-2968331/

Institute of Foreign Affairs. (2010). *Statements and Declarations of SAARC Summits of the Heads of State or Government (1985-2010)*. Kathmandu: IFA.

Iyer, R. R. (2015). Neighborhood Tensions: India's Trans-Boundary Water Relations. *Global Asia*, 10(1).

Krishnan, A. (2013). *China Gives Go-ahead of Three New Brahmaputra Dams.* Retrieved February 3, 2023, from The Hindu: https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/China-gives-go-ahead-for-three-new-Brahmaputra-dams/article12323702.ece

Lodrick, D. O., & Ahmad, N. (2022). *Ganges River*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from: https://www.britannica.com/place/Ganges-River

Lohani, M. (2013). Harnessing Nepal's Water Resources in National Interest: A Book Review. *Annual Journal of the Nepal Council of World Affairs*. Kathmandu: NCWA.

Manhas, N. S., & Yadav H. G. (2022). Relooking India-China Water Relations: A Major Concern? *The Financial Express*.

Ministry of Energy, *Water Resources and Irrigation SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation (Electricity)*. (2021). Retrieved from: https://www.moewri.gov.np/images/category/SAARC-Framework-Agreement. pdf

Ministry of External Affairs. (2022). *India - Bangladesh Joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India*. Government of India.

Ministry of Power. (2018). *Guidelines for Import/Export (Cross Border) of Electricity.*

Ministry of Water Resources, Government of Bangladesh. (1999). *National Water Policy*.

Ministry of Water Resources, Government of Bangladesh. (2011). *Framework*

Agreement on Cooperation for Development (FACD) between India and Bangladesh on September 6, 2011.

Ministry of Water Resources, Government of India. (2012). *National Water Policy*. GOI.

Modi, N. (2022). *India-Nepal Joint Vision Statement on Power Sector Cooperation*. Retrieved from: India-Nepal Joint Vision Statement on Power Sector Cooperation: https://narendramodi.in

Moore, S. (2013, March 28). China's Massive Water Problem. *The New York Times*.

Nepal Foreign Affairs. (2016). *BBIN 3rd JWG Meeting on Sub-Regional Cooperation Held in Dhaka (Press Release)*. Retrieved February 2, 2023, from Nepal Foreign Affairs: https://nepalforeignaffairs.com/bbin-3rd-jwg-meeting-sub-regional-cooperation-held-dhaka-press release/

Nepal Foreign Affairs. (2017). *India-Bangladesh Joint Statement\Prime Minister Hasina Requests Modi to Facilitate Power Cooperation with Nepal*. Retrieved from: https://nepalforeignaffairs.com/india-bangladesh-joint-statementprime-minister-hasina-request-modi-to-faciliate-power-cooperation-with-nepal-full-text-of-joint-statement/

Nepal Law Commission. (2015). *The Constitution of Nepal*. NLC.

Poudel, S. N. (2009). Water Resources Utilization: Irrigation. In Dhungel, D. N. and Pun, S. B. (Eds.), *The Nepal-India Water Resources Relationship: Challenges.* Springer Science+Business Media.

Prime Minister's Office. (2022). *India - Bangladesh Joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India*. Retrieved from: https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1857392

Pun S. B. (2004). Overview: Conflicts Over the Ganga. In Subba, B. and Pradhan, K. (Eds.), *Disputes Over the Ganga: A Look at Potential Water-Related Conflicts in South Asia*. Panos Institute South Asia.

Rasgotra, M. K. (2004). *India-Nepal Relations: The Challenge Ahead.* New Delhi: Rupa & Co. in Association with Observer Research Foundation.

SAARC (2014, November). *SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation (Electricity)*.

SAARC. (2020). *Energy Transport Science and Technology*. Retrieved from SAARC Secretariat: http://saarc-sec.org/areas_of_cooperation/area_detail/energy-transport-science-and-technology/click-for-details_10)

SARI Energy. (2023). *Cross Border Electricity Trade*. Retrieved from: https://sari-energy.org/program-activities/cross-border-electricity-trade/

Sukla, A. (2019). *Sub-regional Cooperation under BBIN Framework: An Analysis.* New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs.

Tariq. K., & Balaji, M. S. (2016). *BBIN Paradigm Change in South Asia*. Vivekananda New Delhi: International Foundation, New Delhi.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. (2023). *BIMSTEC*. Retrieved from: https://bimstec.org/bimstec-history/

The Daily Observer. (2023, February 15). India to assist Bangladesh Import Hydropower from Nepal. *The Daily Observer.*

The Economic Times. (2016, October 5). *Why India is Worried about China's Dam Projects on the Brahmaputra River*. Retrieved from: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/why-india-is-worried-about-chinas-dam-projects-on-the-brahmaputra-river/articleshow/54691589.cms

The Kathmandu Post. (2021, February 28). *India Introduces Procedure that will Allow Nepal to Export Power to It.* Retrieved from: https://tkpo.st/3q5Kdzz

The Kathmandu Post. (2022, April 2). *Nepal, India Agree to Expand Power Cooperation under BBIN Framework*. Retrieved from: https://tkpo.st/3wVeN6g

The Times of India. (2013, January 30). Business Line. *The Times of India.*

The World Bank (2014). *Ganges Strategic Basin Assessment: A Discussion of Regional Opportunities and Risks.* Washington, DC: The World Bank.

Upadhyay, S. N. (2013). *International Water Courses Law and A Perspective on Nepal-India Cooperation*. Kathmandu: Ekta Books.

Water Technology. (2023). *South-to-North Water Diversion Project*. Retrieved from: https://www.water-technology.net/projects/south_north/

World Scan. (2023). *Holy River Ganges*. Retrieved from: https://educationworldscan.blogspot.com/2014/06/holy-river-ganges.html