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**SINO-INDIAN BORDER AND WATER DISPUTES:  
PREDICAMENTS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

**Abstract**

*This article focuses on two major issues causing deterioration of Sino-Indian relations alongwith a close look on areas of convergence enabling them to rise as leading powers in Asia. Certainly they are not equivalent in all aspects however; both have convergences and divergences on some issues which will be discoursed in further discussion, while considering possible solutions of their vulnerabilities. For example, there is aberration of interests between them like the border conflicts and water issues but strong convergence is found in trade. Here an effort has been made to highlight whether Chinese and Indian courses of conduct lead them to act as rivals or partners.*

**Key Words:** People's Republic of China, India, Tibet, Arunachala Pradesh, Brahmaputra

**Introduction**

At present the Sino-Indian relations are facing great vagueness and equivocalness, the reason is that both the states are using diverse attitude of methodology and way to settle down the tensions which are worsening their mutual interests. Both the countries are trying their best to come forth as regional stake holder primarily due to the mutual hunch and distrust, instead of the legacy of issues.

China and India, both are the largest states of Asia and most populous nations of the world, sharing a number of interests particularly in the fields of trade and economy. Both are passing through a phase of rapid economic development. However, they are clambering in defining their weighty role in global economic system. They are also promoting the concept of a multi-polar world so that they can get enough space to perform as major world powers beside United States. China is pursuing its strategic objectives in the region, following its desire to preserve a nonviolent global environment having pleasant interactions with all the countries specifically with neighbouring states and to annul any endeavour to form blocs against China. Most importantly Beijing aims to develop new markets, resources and investment opportunities to accelerate its economy and trade. Further, it wishes to have a coherent resolution of domestic tensions and instability in its different regions. To accomplish all these targets, China has to perform its duties of a responsible country in regional and global affairs as well. Further, it has to develop its friendly and cooperative links with all regional states including India by overwhelming the inherited bilateral disputes.

On the other side, India also has the wish to settle down its internal problems as well as establish positive interactions with a big stake holder of the region, China. However, the historical bequest of border tensions resists in development of friendly ties between these two major countries of Asia. Some Indians have the desire to interact with China friendly, but some of their countrymen including few people of security establishment consider China as a big security threat ("potential threat," 1998). Keeping this scenario in view, it would be appropriate to focus on main deviation points that are the main source of misunderstanding, tangling relations, intuition and distrust between them.

**Historical Legacies in Sino-Indian Relations**

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In the start of relations there was a period of Sino-Indian honeymoon, a famous phrase “Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai” was generally used both in China and India, elaborating their strong relationship (Radchenko, 2014). Soon a rift was found in Sino-Indian relations on Tibet Issue, then a war was also fought between them in 1962 (Lanteigne, 2016, p.203). Previous axiom was swapped with “Hindi-Chine bye-bye”. Later, when Beijing espoused a policy of economic reforms in 1978 there was again a change in the previous slogan which turned into “Hindi-Chine buy buy” (Farooq & Rashid, 2017) and strong trade links were established between Beijing and New Delhi. Both sates have also made collective efforts in shaping “Asian Century” as partners.

### **Sino-Indian Relations during 1<sup>st</sup> Decade after Independence**

Sino-Indian relations remained pleasant during 1st decade after independence. Both the countries agreed on an accord of peaceful coexistence in 1954 that is called “Panchsheel” (Jain, 2017, p.34). The basic principles this agreement were comprised on respect for state integrity, independence, non-violence, non-intervening in internal affairs of each other’s country, parity and common welfare, and passive co-existence (Pokharel, 2013).

### **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Decade: Revolt in Tibet and Sino-Indian Border Disputes**

During a revolt in Tibet in 1959, a neighbouring region which Beijing claims as a part of mainland China, India provided economic and strategic support to Tibetan people. New Delhi granted political asylum to Tibetan Buddha’s spiritual leader; Dalai Lama (Scobell et al., 2014; Jain, 2017, p.41) which brought a drastic change and intensified Sino-Indian relations. Then there were some other boundary issues which worsen their relations like Tawang issue, McMahan line issue and the Indian claims over Chinese administrated area of Aksai Chin etc. Resultantly there was a low scale border war between China and India. Chinese military crushed their competitors and marched deep in Indian territory (Cheng, 2010, Lanteigne, 2016, p.113). After that they terminated their all links with each other (Pokharel, 2013).

However, this situation started easing in late 1980s after China’s adoption of new economic policy of open up. Since then both neighbouring states interconnected in economic and trade relations by putting their boundary disputes aside.

### **Chinese Perspective towards India**

Deng Xiaoping was most influential Chinese statesman and leader after President Mao Zedong in the history. He brought a revolution in agrarian China and introduced radical changes in Chinese politics and economy. Former American statesman Mr. Hennery Kissinger has credited China’s unprecedented economic prowess to Deng Xiaoping (2011, p.882) Deng had focused on industrial development and economic boom in China and started establishing trade relationship with all regional and global states. He denoted neighbouring India with great trade potential and market opportunity for Chinese products. Deng proclaimed, “Only when China and India develop well, can one claim that the century of Asia has come. If China and India strengthen cooperation, Asian unity, stability and prosperity will be very hopeful; the world will be in peace and make more progress” (Singh, 2011, p.20).

President Xi Jinping has initiated a win-win agenda through “Belt and Road Initiative” for all states and regions including India. But Indian response in this regard is still awaited. Although both are working together on different forums like “Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar Economic Corridor” (BCIM-EC) and “Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank” (AIIB) which are closely linked with ‘BRI’ (Blanchard, 2018, p.5). So it seems that China’s relations with India would remain on balancing as well as cooperation during 21<sup>st</sup> century.

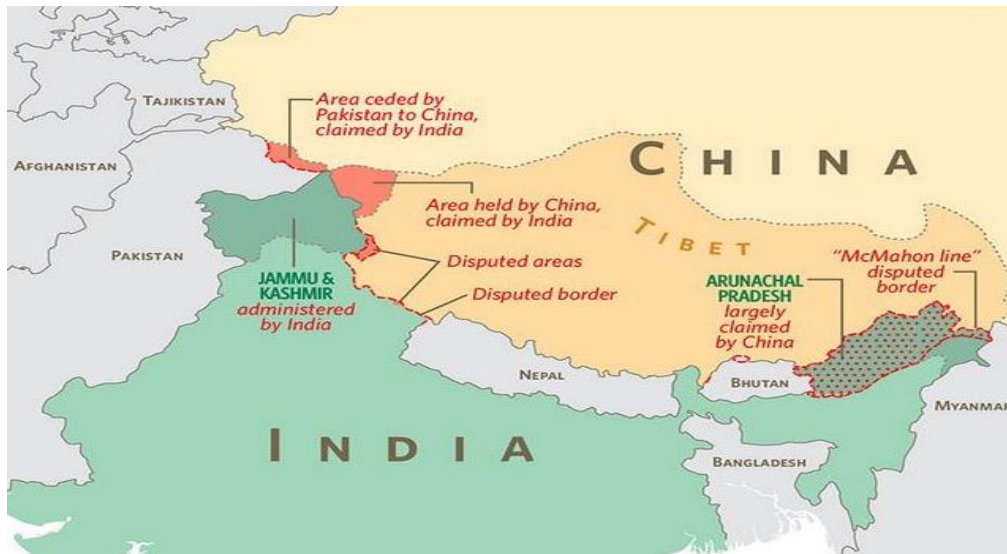
### **Conflicts in Sino-Indian Relations**

There are some internal and external factors involved in deteriorating Sino-Indian relations. Firstly, border issues especially the Tibet issue is more important in worsening their relations since inception. Secondly, the water issue has also gotten importance in waning Sino-Indian bilateral relationship. These two issues worsened their past relations, have impacts on their current relations and definitely will have negative effects on their future interactions as well. Certainly, this will affect their growth, stability and peace cause inside and outside the constituency.

### **Sino-Indian Border Dispute**

The main cause of worsening the China and India relations is the boundary disputes. The border question is linked up with the dubious status of McMahon line, a border line between Tibet and India drawn under Simla convention in 1914 (Makhaik, 2011). India favours this line in its territorial claims but the Chinese stance is vice versa, presenting that China was not a part of this accord. India arrogates about 43,180 squares kilometers of Aksai Chin in Kashmir region under Chinese possession, it also includes an area of 5180 squares kilometers which Pakistan ceded to China under Pak-China boundary agreement in 1963 (Verma, 2010).

Contrary to this China calls for 90,000 kilometers area in Arunachal Pradesh, under Indian control (Mitchell, & Bajpae, 2007). There is no significant progress in solving these historical tensions, because Aksai Chin is vital for Beijing as it connects Tibet with China's Sinkiang province. On the other side India's control over Arunachal Pradesh is important for stability and control over North-Eastern side of India which is affected by insurgencies (Mitchell, & Bajpae, 2007).



Source: <https://kashmirwatch.com/sino-indian-trade/>

The relations between China and India remained hostile after 1962 border clash. These relations again intensified in February 1987, when India granted statehood to Arunachal Pradesh, as China claims this region a part of Southern Tibet. The situation was so acute that it was seemed that another Sino-India border war is about to happen. China showed severe concerns over Indian possession in key regions of Arunachal Pradesh mainly in Twang that is important for Tibetans as it relates to the birthplace of the 6th Dalai Lama (Malik, 2007). So, China takes the advantage of religious attachments with Arunachal Pradesh, on the same grounds India justified its claims over Mount Kailash Manasarovar in Tibet, being a consecrated place in Hinduism (Malik, 2004).

However, the border tensions between both the countries started easing and their bilateral interactions improved through border agreements in 1993 and 1996. It was decided that neighbours will remain peaceful on their borders and any divergence will not be allowed to affect their bilateral talks and collaboration. They also decided to pursue Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) on border issues including troops cut; the local military commanders will arrange regular meetings to discuss the border issues and other measures will be observed. An additional step was taken towards border peace process in 2003 when both countries agreed on appointment of 'Special Representatives' on border issues (Holslag, 2010).

These representatives arranged meetings and talked several times on border issues, however, it is also true that the situation is not encouraging as no advancement has been achieved yet. Both the states are also indulged in their superiority complex due to some reasons or the others. None of these wants to step back its claims. China is an Asian giant, emerging as economic world power competing with the US. It is a responsible state, performing different acts of development in different regions in Asia and the world. China's new Silk Route called "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) is an example of Chinese engagement in world affairs which will provide economic benefits

to several linked countries. Further China wants to have an upper hand in regional issues and wants to ensure India's good conduct. China is also following its strategic concerns in South Asia, as its western sector is facing stability complications. India is confronting with Pakistan on Kashmir issue; this situation favours Chinese intentions to keep New Delhi under strategic pressure by engaging her on two fronts Beijing and Islamabad (Lal, 2008).

On the other hand, India had also never missed the chance of intensifying the situation neither in 1959 when there was a revolt in Tibet, a region under Chinese control. New Delhi was quick to support this rebellion act of Tibetan people and granted them political asylum (Scobell et al., 2014; Lanteigne, 2016, p.203) and same in 1962 war that worsened its relations with China. A three months long 'Doklam standoff' in 2017 proved a serious blow in Sino-Indian relations in 21<sup>st</sup> century (Raza, 2017). So it may be true to say that neither of them wants to compromise on their territorial claims perhaps due to their national interests and security reasons. However, verbally India expresses its viewpoint about Chinese claims over Tibet in the words that "Tibet is not a critical issue in China-India relations because Indian government is neither abettor nor instigator of political cause of the Tibetans" (Dar, 2014, p.2). To strengthen this stance India has formally recognized Tibet as China's integral part in 2003.

However, no serious effort from either side has been made to ease border tensions. China affirmed its claim on Arunachal Pradesh at several occasions, on the other side, India consider its constitutional right to have control over this region claiming that it merged with Indian Union in 1987. So, New Delhi has a firm stand on Arunachal Pradesh and gives no weightage to Chinese claims in this regard. Thus, subtle border disputes have intensified Sino-Indian mutual relations. These issues require immediate solution as no long lasting peace and security of this part of the world could be guaranteed without it.

### **Global Water Crisis**

Water has always remained a precious commodity and part & parcel for human life. The world as a whole is facing the shortage of fresh water resources along with climate changes which has been emerged as most hazardous in many parts of the world. According to a report released by World Economic Forum in 2019 "water crises" ranked highest in the South Asian region, even terrorism and manmade environmental catastrophe are at 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> place. "At a country level, water crises ranked as the topmost risk in India, second in Pakistan and fourth in Sri Lanka." ("the South Asia Risks," 2019)

This worth and dearness of water shows its strategic importance in geopolitical sphere. Viewing this scenario, it is clear that water may become a cause of contention or collaboration between states. Due to swift economic development and rapid growth of population all riparian states are facing the issue of water shortage. Rising water needs, increasing urbanization, vying water usage including hazards of climate change aggravated the situation and made the fresh water ratio for human beings colossally unproportioned. Most of the developing countries are facing the major threat of potential water clash due to dawdle and in-effective management of water resources (Hussain, 2013). To limit this possibility of conflict, different countries have made various treaties to manage water resources like Indo-Nepal Gandak agreement (1959), Indo-Pak Indus river treaty (1960), Indo-Bangla treaty of Ganges water resources (1977) (Brennan, 2008).

### **Water Issues between China and India**

Perhaps, the biggest and critical region where water conflicts might start abruptly is Himalaya. Where China and India are sharing numerous transboundary rivers, comprising Brahmaputra which is the most contentious river between them. A large population requiring plenty of water resources but ineffective water sharing policies may cause a potential Sino-Indian conflict. However, heads of both states have recognized this critical situation of water security. Mr. Wen Jiabao, then Vice Premier of China stated in 1998 that shortage of water in the country threatened the "the very survival of the Chinese nation" (Morton, 2009; Albert & Xu, 2016).

Indian Prime Minister Mr. Manmohan Sing also stated in 2007, "we face the real prospect of reduced supply of water. This threat is of particular concern to us in India as we have, since times immemorial, depended on glaciers for our water supply in this part of our sub-continent" (Kapila & Kapila, 2007, p.16). It is pertinent to mention here that the potential threat of war is not only relates with water crisis but it also linked up with territorial claims as Tibetan plateau is the starting point of main rivers crucial for China, India as well as for Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal (Hussain, 2013).

**Shared Rivers between China and India**

China and India are sharing four main rivers, but not entirely between them only as some other neighbouring countries are also sharing these transboundary rivers. The Brahmaputra river, Shiquan / Indus river, Kosi and Ghaghara rivers are shared by China and India four other participant states are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal respectively.

Distribution of Shared Rivers according to their riparian status

River Name	Sharing States
Indus/(Shiquan) River	China, India, and Pakistan
Brahmaputra/ (Yarlung Zangbo) River	China, India, Bangladesh, and Bhutan
Sutlej/(Langqên Zangbo) River	China, India, and Pakistan
Kosi/(Arun) River	China, Nepal, and India
Ghaghara/(Kongque) River	China, Nepal, and India

Source: Xinhuanet and Indian Ministry for water resources

However, China, being an upper riparian, may have an advantage in their usage as all these rivers are stemming from Chinese and Tibetan origin. India is the middle riparian country in respect of Brahmaputra, Sutlej and Indus river systems and lower riparian in remaining two rivers.

### **Importance of Brahmaputra River**

Brahmaputra river emanating from the Tibetan Plateau, is signified as it is among the largest rivers of the world (Chellaney, 2009). Stemming from southern Tibet it flows in China and India through Himalayas then Bangladesh, lastly merged with the Ganges river and draining into east Bay of Bengal. After critical analysis of all these shared river systems, it is inevitable that the Brahmaputra river is the most contentious one. It carries three major reasons.

First, being upper riparian China occupies significant parts of Brahmaputra river. It covers more than fifty percent basin area of this river. So, China has a potential edge on its usage as compared with the other sharing countries of Brahmaputra river. Second, this river weighs more importance near China and India. It fulfills thirty percent of freshwater needs and forty percent of hydropower potential of India. On Chinese side, it is not significant for freshwater supply, but importance for Tibetan region. It has significance for Tibetan civilization, agriculture and energy needs. Third, this river is also associated with China-India boundary clashes. Both the states have strong claims in East Himalayan region which is tricuspid among China, India and Bhutan, from west to Brahmaputra river in the east, along the apex of Himalayas. More than one million people lives in this disputed region covering the area of 90,000 Km<sup>2</sup>, called Sothern Tibet in China whereas Arunachal Pradesh in India (Zhang, 2016).

### **Zangmu Dam on Brahmaputra River and Diversion Issue**

In late 2014, China has completed its largest hydropower dam called Zahgmu dam on Brahmaputra river. India has shown serious concerns on its construction and many international security observers has warned that it may become a cause of ‘water wars’ between China and India, blowing up already tense border situation (Chellaney, 2013a). This dam is a part of Chinese Zangmu hydropower project estimating 510 megawatts power generation (Dutta, 2012).

The major Indian concerns are on Chinese plans on diverting the flow of Brahmaputra river. India claims that China is working on “Grand Western Water diversion Project” (GWWDP) aiming to divert water flow of six upstream rivers in its southern west region. The Mekong river, Brahmaputra and Salween are included in this project to Impregnate its dry zones in its northern parts through a system of tunnels and reservoirs (Holslag, 2011).

While, Chinese administration has denied any such activity which result in fading the relations with downstream countries (“China defends,” 2014). However, China wants to fulfill Tibet’s energy requirements by utilizing the hydropower potential in Brahmaputra river but it abnegated Indian claims that it has any proposal or future plans to divert its flow (Zhang, 2016).

### **Chin’s Role in Water Governance**

China, being Asia’s water tower, is a source of trans-border water flow to several countries of the region. China’s non-supportive attitude in international water governance strengthened the perception of downstream countries regarding China as uncooperative water hegemon (Chellaney, 2013b). It has also voted against the adoption of United Nation’s “Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses” (UNWC) in General Assembly in 1997. It has also been criticized due to adopting same attitude by avoiding any water agreement at regional level.

However, Chinese actions in this regard are not so bad as compared to other upper riparian states of the world. Like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan being upper riparian of Central Asia, did not give much weightage to the water needs of downstream states including Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan while deciding hydropower projects (Europe and Central Asia Report, 2014). Even India itself doesn’t observe ethics of water usage while dealing with its own downstream countries Pakistan and Bangladesh. Despite signing treaties, India has multiple times violated the international water usage rules, like diversion of water flows and building dams on transboundary rivers (Zhang, 2016).

While taking in to account the UNWC 1997, if China has voted against this convention the India itself has not ratified the agreement. From the whole continent Asia only two states Uzbekistan and Vietnam have endorsed it. India may blame that by doing so China is following the doctrine of absolute control over territorial reserves. However, as concerned with China the situation is opposite to this blame as there are many factors behind its hesitation from binding in any regional and intra-regional water governance. Rather, China wants to follow restricted territorial sovereignty and its rights as being an upper riparian state as well as observe the rights of other lower riparian states too. This concept is very much closed with basic principles of 1997 UN Water Convention; the just and equitable water utilization for all (Wouters, & Chen, 2011). Same has also been expressed by the Chinese spokesman of ministry of foreign affairs, “we have taken full account of the concerns of the downstream areas (in our damming building projects)” (“China defends,” 2014).

According to a study by Professor Patricia Wouters, Xiamen University, comparing the Chinese water treaty practices in transboundary water usage with the basic concepts implemented by the UNWC, which clearly indicates that china is already following the basic ethics of UNWC: the supportive approach, the customs of equal and equitable use of water, and not causing major transboundary harms, despite treaties’ the vague content (Wouters & Chen, 2011).

Lastly, it is a reality that there is no effective treaty or mechanism among China-India-Bangladesh regarding the issues raised on water usage of Brahmaputra river. However, several agreements have been signed between them on Brahmaputra river. In 2005, during the visit of Mr. Wen Jiabao to Bangladesh, both the countries agreed to cooperate and protect regional water resources following the principle of fairness and equality. Again in 2010 during Hasina Wajid’s visit to China, both states have signed an agreement on cooperation and sharing the hydrological data on Brahmaputra river, this Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was renewed in 2014.

Similarly, India has also been signed a treaty with China in 2002 for information sharing on Brahmaputra river during flood season. Then in 2006, both countries agreed on setting up a mechanism for discussion and cooperation on emergency management, flood information data and other relevant issues. An MoU on Brahmaputra river was 3<sup>rd</sup> time renewed between China and India in May 2013 during Li Keqiang’s visit to India. Another MoU on trans-border rivers, was signed between them in October 2013, on changing the schedule of data provision from first June-fifteenth October to fifteenth May-fifteenth October (Zhang, 2016).

China and India has several rounds of bilateral dialogues to cover up their disputes, but all in vein. Now the tensions between Sino-Indian relations have been extended beyond border clashes. Water dispute is becoming a critical security issue between their relations, leading to a new era of hostility (Hussain, 2013). In general, the basic

reason of non-cooperative attitude on trans-border water usage of Brahmaputra river and others, is linked with border disputes, which do not allow them to have an effective and trusted water sharing agreement.

### **Solutions**

Based on the above discussion, following measures are proposed to improve Sino-Indian relations:

- The process of strategic dialogues between both countries should be enhanced and improved to executive level meetings. High ranked officials should participate in these meetings accompany with diplomats, security advisors and military policymakers;
- A strong communication and co-ordination is direly needed in between their regional institutions;
- Both countries have to develop a more positive image of each other at government and society level,
- They have to develop the basis of better mutual understanding on non-traditional security issues, such as the maritime security co-operation;
- Both the states should be more careful while handling the issues of sensitive nature like Tibetan independence movement, boundary claims, water sharing, so called string of Pearls, activism in Indian Ocean and South China Sea etc.;
- China and India should have more emphasis on economic stability by promoting economic ties, leaving lesser room to focus on destructive aims.

### **Conclusion**

Sino-Indian relations have been exacerbated since the beginning of their interactions, due to border clashes and now the water issues have added fuel to the fire. The water clash is tardily imparting a deeper layer of complexity to the border issue. Particularly the claims of possession on Arunachal Pradesh, through which Brahmaputra river flows, have become the bone of contention between both states restricting significant collaboration on water sharing. It can be concluded that peripheral claims and water issues between China and India are closely interconnected with each other. Further, both the countries have rightful reasons and uncompromising support to their claims, this attitude is also a hurdle in easing their tensions. Thus apart from territorial claims, water has also become a prime dispute in determining the future interactions between these Asian giants.

In the absence of effective working mechanism between both states and with persistent boundary disputes, water issue could possibly may pose a serious threat to Sino-Indian relations in current millennia. The aftershocks of their clashes will certainly have effects on other regional and trans-regional states and will affect the environment of regional peace and security as well. No doubt, China has to show more cooperative and engaged behaviour with neighbouring states on water issues, but labeling it as water hegemon is not correct. In order to preclude the clash from escalating, there is a dire need to start executive level diplomatic dialogues between both the states to address their misunderstandings regarding border and water issues, the aspect of third party mediation is also encouraged. The economic terms and market forces can also play a role in keeping them away from any military adventure.

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