



War over water?

Tibet, the Sino-Indian power play and potential consequences for Asia

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Abstract

Tibet is not only the roof of the world, but also its third pole. All the important rivers of South East Asia and China stem from here, giving China the power to decide over distribution politics. Severe water shortages in North China, leading to the South-North Water Diversion Project, may lead to bringing Tibetan water to North China and thus diverting it from India, Bangladesh, Myanmar etc. India has its own drought catastrophe and needs all the water available; simultaneously hundreds of dams being built on both sides of the disputed Sino-Indian border further enhance the risks of a military confrontation between the super powers.

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Analysis

Historical Aspects

Undoubtedly, the relations between India and China keep improving. However, for the last 2000 years nothing has really happened in this respect, except for some lone travellers like Xuan Zang in the 7th century coming from China and returning after 16 years, some of which were spent in India. Separated by the Himalayas, both countries focused either on national issues or, in the case of China, on maritime adventures – taking the eunuch Zheng He as far as Africa in the 15th century – or on the northwestern barbarians; in the case of India it was the northwestern region, where first the Aryans came, later the Mongols, becoming Moghuls in India. Then, after Indian independence and the following partition in 1947 and the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950s, the bilateral border issue arose. Before leaving India, the British helped divide the subcontinent into a newly created, Muslim Pakistan (West), a dominantly Hindu India and again a Muslim Pakistan (East), which, as mostly the case with British colonial heritage, resulted in the region descending into chaos immediately. Not satisfied with dividing the country, they left Kashmir to itself and so created one of the most difficult to solve political conflicts in the world; the (Indian) state of Jammu and Kashmir being occupied by Indian, Pakistan and even Chinese forces. Incidentally in 1948, Pakistan wanted Kashmir partly for its water security, which we will return to later.

The border disputes between India and China are mainly due to the fact that British India in 1914 negotiated with Tibet, which was then seen and behaving as an independent state. Later, the Chinese, claiming Tibet had always been part of the Chinese empire (Zhongguo) and had therefore not been entitled to negotiate anything in the first place, didn't respect the border between the new Indian Republic and the new People's Republic of China. Not only in the West, where the Kashmir conflict has now lingered on for 70 years and the so-called Aksai China border dispute remains to be settled, but also in the East, where a whole Indian province, Arunachal Pradesh, just cannot be found on Chinese maps; the region being depicted as South Tibet and therefore China.

In 1962, the first Sino-Indian war, also called the Sino-India Border Conflict, broke out. After having given asylum to the Dalai Lama, who fled Chinese Tibet in 1959 after several uprisings, the Indians began to post soldiers in the region, and not only south, but also north of the McMahon Line,¹ the eastern portion of a so-called Line of Actual Control.² On the 8th September 1962 the Chinese army conquered some Indian outposts north of the McMahon Line and the war started. The Indians were completely unprepared and called the US for help; after some fighting the Chinese withdrew their forces again. The role of the CIA and US President Kennedy in this, the latter simultaneously being busy at the time with the Cuba crisis, can be studied further in the excellent book "JFK's Forgotten Crisis".

Ever since, bilateral relations have been tense and until now, despite common army manoeuvres, political talks and economic cooperation, still both countries are definitely not at ease with each other. Nevertheless, the leaders of China and India, namely President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, meet more than once a year; they installed a Strategic and Economic Dialogue, a Defense Dialogue; Chinese and Indian armies even carry out joint exercises and their navies cooperate in anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean. So to

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McMahon_Line

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Line_of_Actual_Control



some extent they rediscovered each other. China has become India's biggest foreign trade partner; so far, so good.

However, they both try not to allow the other side to dominate in what the Indians call the Indian sea. Though China is spending four times as much on a military budget than India, the latter has become the biggest importer of weapons in the world. India takes 4th place on Global Firepower (GFP), China is 3rd (out of 126 states). Though population numbers are more or less the same for both countries – 1.3 billion – in India every year 3 million more young men and women reach the military age than in China. More than 500 million Indians are under age, and 25,300 million of them are not even 15. China is an ageing society.

The case of Nepal

Ever since the devastating earthquake in Nepal in April 2015, China as well as India have turned their attention more and more towards the mutual border region. Nepal, to begin with, is situated at a very specific and interesting location. India and Nepal not only share the same border, but they even share the same people. More than 5 million Nepali citizens live in India, and they even serve in the Indian army. Both countries have a lot in common, be it historical, cultural or other values. Of course, infrastructure and energy are important fields of cooperation. India has been building more than 1400 km of roads in Nepal, and it supports dam building through investment and manpower. Given the topographical situation, naturally hydro energy plays an important role in the country's development.

Nepal's announcement of its new constitution in late September 2015 led to domestic and international opposition. In Nepal's southern district, Madhesis and Tharu, ethnic groups representing over 40 percent of the population in Terai region, have been protesting against the new arrangement. They are afraid that the newly proposed provincial borders could lead to their political marginalization. India has its own objections to the new constitution, and its motives are not as selfless as they may appear. Madhesis are also an important voting bloc in the Indian state of Bihar. The result of all this was an unofficial blockade halting the transport of Indian goods and fuel to the country in October 2015. This could push Nepal closer to China; so India's show of strength may prove to actually weaken its future position in the subcontinent. Why is this relevant?

Water and Energy Problems

I would like to focus in this article on one of the many problems the region represents, and this is in my opinion the most important of all – water.

As we are well aware, Tibet, also called the third pole due to its massive sources of water, frozen in glaciers and permafrost as it is, is the principle source of water for all of China, India and South East Asia. Not only does the Yellow River and the Changjiang, known in the West as Yangtze, flowing through huge territories in China, stem from Tibet; more importantly for the point I would like to make are the rivers flowing southwards, namely the Yarlong Tsangpo, as the Tibetans call it. It comes from Western Tibet, flows to the East for about 1000 km, then makes a sharp turn first to the north and then, in what is said to be the world's deepest gorge, turns back on itself and flows southwards into the Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh (named Siang), and then to Bangladesh (named the Brahmaputra, "Son of Brahma"). It nurtures the whole of Bangladesh. Or take the Ganges, India's holiest river. Its source is unclear, but its tributaries definitely stem from Tibet, flowing into India and making the river, thanks to many tributaries, one of the biggest in Asia. Holy cities like Rishikesh and of course Vara-



nasi, formerly known as Benares, lie along its banks. Millions of people depend on this river; hundreds of millions on the other water sources coming down from the Himalayas; e.g. the Sutlej, a tributary to the Indus, comes from Tibet, as does the Indus itself, just to name two.

Look to the East: Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Not a single river of any importance stems from within the national borders; all the rivers come from China, many from Tibet. The most important are in Myanmar; the Irrawaddy, the country's largest river and most important waterway; the Salween and the Lancang, (as it is known in China), later becomes the Mekong in Vietnam. On these and many other rivers in the region hundreds of dams are being built, hundreds more are being planned, many of these by Chinese companies like Sinohydro or the Three Gorges Project Co.

Now while this may sound just like any geographic fact, not really to be concerned about, it could have the most important influence on South East Asian politics imaginable. All the water for India and SEA coming from China, essentially means that China can control the tap where all the water comes from. After all, Tibet is China. This is not the place to argue about the righteousness of this claim; it's a fact. So actually China can control the water situation and supply of 3 billion people.

In June 2016, the Indian government released plans to implement a so-called Geospatial Information Regulation Bill 2016. It forbids using wrong depiction, publication or even acquisition of Indian geospatial information. Fines range from between Rs. 10 lakh to Rs. 100 crore. Even on Google you might find the wrong map, so beware your next presentation! Why is that so? Because China claims huge parts of what India sees as its own territory. As mentioned above, the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, about 80000 sq. km, east of Bhutan, is just not to be found on Chinese maps. Instead, we find Chinese territory there, South Tibet as it is.

And of course the single most important reason for this is: water. It is the one resource we can't live without, it can't be transported over huge distances economically, and we need it to survive. Look at the droughts in India, worsening every year due to late monsoon winds and lesser rainfall. Only about 3% of all the water on the earth is fresh water, most of it bound in ice, glaciers, snow, leaving a mere 0,01% surface water in rivers, lakes and swamps. Water is precious, and we tend to waste it for several reasons. In order to produce just one litre of milk, you need 140 litres of water; for one kilo of rice, 3000 litres, and to produce just one kilo of beef, you need 16000 litres of water! This is one of the reasons China just published plans to reduce the year by year consumption of meat by 50%! An ambitious plan, but one that could reduce the carbon dioxide emissions by 1 billion tonnes by 2030, and save water; water China urgently needs.

The water situation in South East Asia could be avoided if the Chinese just allowed the water to flow to India and Bangladesh, to Myanmar and Vietnam. But China needs the water itself! According to the newest satellite data, Beijing is sinking by 11 cm each year due to over exploitation of the water under the city (data says Shanghai is sinking by seven millimeters each year). Beijing is said to be the 5th most water stressed city in the world. About 20 million people live there, but the city only has reserves to accommodate 12 million. The infamous South-North Water Diversion Project, already drafted by Mao, has become reality. More than 40 billion cubic metres of fresh water is being diverted from South China to the North; rivers and lakes are being connected and huge waterways across the country support the dry North with the much needed resource. It started in the East, taking the old canal from Hangzhou to Beijing and broadening it; then continued in Central China, diverting and connecting hundreds of rivers, and now it's time to turn to the West. And the West, where all the water comes from, is Tibet. So why not take the water from Tibetan rivers and divert them to the North? It's China's water, after all. Or is it?



Not only is there a water shortage in North China but China has another problem too. It is in urgent need of energy. Energy comes from coal (still about 70% in China), oil, gas, nuclear power plants, and alternate energies are also on their way, from wind to solar. All this is fine, but it's just not enough. And of course fossil energies are being criticized for their environmental implications. So what would be better than hydro energy, clean, abundant, and easy to support? The world knows about 50000 dams, out of which approximately 25000 lie in China. China is building literally hundreds of dams in the Himalaya, in Tibet. And not only there, they are also building dams in Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam! Laos doesn't even need the electricity it produces; it sells it directly to China. So China is not only building dams in China, but also abroad, using their infrastructure to generate the much needed power supply for its own people.

So are the Chinese to blame for this situation? Of course not. India is no different, having established a huge Water Diversion program, which plans to connect and divert about 34 rivers in North and West India. And of course, India is building its own share of dams. And again, India needs to divert rivers to fight the droughts, but does it need huge dams or several smaller projects? And how does India adhere to the water rights? Does India respect its neighbour's worries about water supply?

The most famous dispute concerns the dam near the border between India and Bangladesh. The Farakka Barrage is a dam on the Bhagirathi River, West Bengal, just a few kilometres from the border with Bangladesh. The purpose of the barrage is to divert water from the Ganges to the Hooghly River; this flows to Kolkata where the harbour needs regular flushing to prevent sediment deposition. There have been many discussions between India and Bangladesh regarding the water supply to Bangladesh; even after signing a treaty in 1996 no actual agreement has been reached.

In the West, on the other side, India and Pakistan signed the so-called Indus Water Treaty in 1960, with a helping hand from the World Bank. Control over the three Eastern rivers – the Beas, Ravi and Sutlej – was given to India and over the three Western rivers – the Indus, Chenab and Jhelum – to Pakistan. However, it wasn't specified as to how the water should be shared. Before the Indus Water Treaty, arrangements to share east and west flowing rivers were more or less ad hoc. In the light of Hindu-Muslim tensions, the water supply could contribute to the existing problems in bilateral relations. Pakistani Islamic radicals must realize that their water security depends on India, given that Pakistan is a lower riparian. On the other hand, both countries are suffering from water stress, so they are taking steps in areas such as drip-in irrigation, desalination plants, and adaptation. So a war over water between Pakistan and India seems unlikely, though the situation is far from settled.

And there are the risks of uncontrolled floods coming from upstream. In 2014, China released huge amounts of water from its Jinhong Dam in Yunnan province, due to heavy rainfall in the region. This led to a significant rise of the Mekong in Thailand and further downstream. The same can happen on the India-Bangladesh border or on any other cross-frontier river. South East Asian states will have to realize they are heavily dependent on each other. Myanmar alone plans nearly one hundred dams on its rivers, with most of the electricity going to Thailand rather than staying in the country. But the Chinese bring the technology and the workers, and their dependence on the big neighbour grows by the day. Myanmar is China's best option for access to the Indian sea in the South West, and at the same time a means to prove its right to what India calls Arunachal Pradesh. This is where the old Burma Road or Stilwell Road, (named after Vinegar Joe Stilwell, the American General in WW2), is being rebuilt by Chinese workers. This road interestingly was built by British and Chinese troops to support Chiang Kaishek's troops in Yunnan against the Japanese forces, so troops could be brought from India



to China faster. It leads from Ledo in Assam (on the border to Arunachal Pradesh) to Burma, now Myanmar. India feels uncomfortable, to put it mildly, with the Chinese presence and road construction works in this sensitive part of the world. India would have preferred to have built the road by itself. Now the road could pose a threat to India, if relations with China deteriorate, but of course could also improve trade with Myanmar and China.

Coming back to Nepal, the earthquake was triggered presumably by the continental drift, the Indian plate pressing into the Eurasian plate, moving about 5 cm a year. This is how the Himalaya range came into existence. The plates still move, and from the resulting frictions more earthquakes are to be expected. But in order to build dams in the Himalaya, you have to use explosives. It is in one of the most sensitive regions of the world, in terms of seismic movements. If that fails, then as one Chinese professor suggests, small, controlled nuclear detonations could help. So the need for water could trigger a catastrophe in the Himalayas. Again, not fiction, just pure science.

Military aspects

Could there really be a war over water in the Himalaya? Considering the ongoing border dispute, the former war in 1962 and the new threat, namely water, a confrontation doesn't seem impossible anymore. China has emerged as a new superpower, and will definitely strengthen its borders or even enlarge its territory, as may be seen in the South China Sea. With the severe water problem especially in North China, China's need for more and cleaner energy for its people in the future, and the fact that the rivers as described above are on Chinese territory anyway, seems to be in ideal situation to make use of this water. India, however, will not tolerate this.

On the other hand, would fighting really take place in the permafrost regions of Arunachal Pradesh? Probably not. Though the Chinese forces in Tibet might be better trained, better equipped and able to move on a far better infrastructure than is the case with the Indian forces, the armies on both sides are more or less evenly matched. A war in the Himalaya would require immense logistical challenges and therefore costs. The real war would be fought at sea. With most of the oil China has to import passing through the Indian Ocean, it would be much easier for India to intercept this trade. The Vikramaditya Aircraft Carrier, bought from the Russians in 2004 and being refurbished ever since, is due to enter service in 2018. It will pose a real threat to Chinese maritime trade, and together with the new Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft, (to be built in an Indo-Russian cooperation), it will be in the same fighter class as the Chinese J-20, equipped with stealth, ability to super cruise above Mach 1 and so on.

So while the Chinese might want to keep a potential border conflict in the Tibetan region, having the advantage of better equipment and more troops; the Indian side would want to transfer the conflict to the sea. The active military personnel of China is about 2.3 million, that of India just 1.3 mio. But China has been building the famous "string of pearls", ports and other facilities, to encircle India. The Chinese have successfully built hubs in Bangladesh (Chittagong), Myanmar (Sittwe and Coco Island), Sri Lanka (Hambantota) and Pakistan (Gwadar). So the war over water could actually be fought on the water, so to speak.



Recommendations

The solution seems to be obvious: A round table whereby all the relevant partners sit and discuss how to distribute the existing sources, how to agree on cross-border rivers, where to build which dams (and small ones instead of big ones, preferably) and so on. It could be so easy. If not, the Indian threat of a war over water is not merely a phrase. There are about 25 wars over water worldwide at the moment (Summer 2016), from Bolivia to Jordan. But a conflict between the super powers, between 3 billion people, is something we all can only lose from. And the waves of migrants following such a disaster would be tremendous. So there is no choice. South East Asia and India are willing to fight for their rights; China has a completely different point of view. The threat for especially poor countries without any military strength like Myanmar or Laos is frightening. A war over water is not science fiction anymore. When discussing security issues in the region, the focus is mostly being laid on the South China Sea, on nuclear submarines, on China trying to secure the oil routes to Japan and so on. The simple resource of water is still not on our minds, and it should be.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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About the Author of this Issue

Dr. Manuel Vermeer, born from a German father and an Indian mother, lived and studied in China as early as 1982. Since more than 25 years he has been one of Germany's leading consultants for doing business in China and India. He published several articles and three books on the topic. Moreover, Dr. Vermeer published Germany's first Tibet thriller in 2015, „Mit dem Wasser kommt der Tod“, describing the water crisis in Tibet and a potential war between China and India by means of a suspense thriller.

He teaches Business Chinese and Intercultural Management at the East Asia Institute, Ludwigshafen (Germany). His extensive experience as a middleman for foreign companies in China and India has helped many clients in solving their problems. Several guest lectures at universities in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, Denmark, India, China. Interviews in leading German radio stations and newspapers; TV report in Spiegel TV (Germany) and on Deutsche Welle (broadcast worldwide in 2007). Languages: German, English, Chinese, Spanish, French.

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