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The China–India Water Dispute

The Potential for Escalation

Dr. Selina Ho



The conflation of the China–India water dispute with larger territorial and political disputes exacerbates water as a source of conflict between them. The waters of the Himalayas are an invaluable resource for the two countries as rapid economic development and population growth stress their water supplies. Among the rivers that cross their disputed border, the Brahmaputra River/Yarlung Tsangpo is the most significant water resource they share. Originating from Tibet, the Brahmaputra crosses the border into Arunachal Pradesh, which is occupied by India but claimed by China as Southern Tibet.

As the upper riparian, China wields significant advantage over India. It withheld hydrological data from India during the Doklam standoff despite an existing hydrological data-sharing agreement between them. In November 2020, China announced plans for hydropower construction on the section of the Brahmaputra closest to India, triggering strong responses from the Indian side. Of greatest concern to India are reports of Chinese plans to build a mega-dam just before the Brahmaputra enters India. News of these plans came at a time when relations between China and India are at a low point, with troops facing off at the Galwan Valley. There were also reports that in the aftermath of the border clashes, China has blocked the flow of the Galwan River, which crosses from the disputed Chinese-administered Aksai Chin region into Ladakh region in India. Indian pundits have accused China of “weaponizing” water and using water for political and strategic leverage over India. They believe that China could cut off water or raise the water levels to flood India should a military conflict break out between them.

The water dispute between China and India is further compounded by the fact that institutionalized cooperation between the two sides is low, consisting only of an expert-level body and a series of memorandums

on hydrological data-sharing. There is no water-sharing agreement or a joint river commission for managing their shared river resources. The difficulties in managing their shared waters, the intertwining of the border and water disputes, and the water scarcity problems they both face have led to predictions of “water wars” between them. Despite these dire predictions, however, armed conflict has not broken out over water. Even when relations are at a nadir, the water dispute did not completely become embroiled with the border dispute even if it did add to the tensions. Why have China and India managed to keep their water dispute from escalating into violent conflict? What are the conditions under which the status quo could change leading to armed conflict over water?

Desecuritizing the Water Dispute

A key strategy both governments have used to prevent their water dispute from boiling over is to desecuritize it. That both sides have desecuritized their water dispute is a bit of a puzzle. Almost all the disputes between them, including the border dispute, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama issue, are painted as existential threats and accepted as such by both sides. Disputes over water are prone to securitization because water concerns basic human rights and survival and is therefore an existential

issue. In fact, “the most obvious resource that is prone to securitization is transboundary water.”¹ Despite these characteristics of water that lends itself to securitization, both the Chinese and Indian government have worked to desecuritize their water dispute. Desecuritization is defined as the “moving of issues off the ‘security agenda’ and back into the realm of public political discourse and ‘normal’ political dispute and accommodation.”² Rhetoric, discourses, and narratives are used to neutralize or reduce the security implications of an issue to lower tensions with another country.

The Chinese government has used assuaging rhetoric to reduce perceptions of its dams as a threat. An oft-repeated rhetoric is that the dams are “run-of-the river,” meaning that they are not capable of storing or diverting large bodies of water. This assuaging rhetoric is most clearly observed during the spring of 2010, following an official Chinese announcement that China is building the Zangmu Dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo. During a China–India strategic dialogue, Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun assured the Indian delegation that the project “was not a project designed to divert water” and would not affect “the welfare and availability of water of the population in the lower reaches of the Brahmaputra.”³ The Chinese

applied desecuritizing rhetoric even when the two armies were facing off at Doklam. In response to Indian revelations that India had not received hydrological data from China during the standoff, the Chinese government avoided linking the data disruption to the Doklam standoff, instead offering a technical explanation that the monitoring stations were being renovated. Similarly, the Indian government has sought to downplay the threats posed by Chinese dams. In response to the news that China was constructing the Zangmu Dam, the Minister of External Affairs said in a statement, “We have ascertained from our own sources that this is a run-of-the river hydro-electric project, which does not store water and will not adversely impact downstream areas in India. Therefore, I believe there is no cause for alarm. I would like to share with you the fact that a large proportion of the catchment of the Brahmaputra is within Indian territory.”⁴

The two countries have cause to desecuritize their water conflict. Lowering tensions with each other will allow both sides to focus on economic growth and development. For China, it is aimed at stabilizing its southern periphery, expanding bilateral trade and investment with India, and reducing India’s motivations for aligning with the United States. On the Indian side, a possible

explanation is that India would not want to provoke China, the more powerful state that dealt it a humiliating defeat in 1962. However, these accounts do not explain why desecuritization only took place for the water dispute but not the other disputes between them. I have argued elsewhere that desecuritization of the water dispute is not only the result of these material reasons but because of a set of ideas among the epistemic communities in both countries that values and prioritizes collaboration on water resources and reducing the perceptions of the water dispute as a threat.⁵

What Can Lead to Escalation?

Nevertheless, the position that both governments have taken to desecuritize their water dispute can change. There are already indications from the overall increase in tensions between the two countries in the past few years that keeping a lid on the water dispute has become harder. Water disputes are never about water resources alone. The water dispute between the two countries is linked with larger political issues and the border conflict. In the limited incidents of water wars in history, water had acted as a catalyst or was used as a pretext for war between countries whose overall relations had deteriorated to the point of hostility.⁶ The Doklam crisis and the

armed clashes in the Galwan Valley resulting in deaths and casualties on both sides point to the rapidly deteriorating relations between them.

Overall relations between the two countries have soured considerably in the past few years. Apart from border issues, China's blocking of India's ascension to the Nuclear Suppliers Group in 2016, which denied India recognition of its rising status, and refusal to name the leader of the Pakistan-based group Jaish-e-Mohammed, Masood Azhar, as a terrorist in the United Nations, did not go down well with the Indians. China has also displayed insensitivity to Indian concerns with initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. India has been suspicious of China's Belt and Road Initiative. On its part, India has acted in ways deemed provocative by the Chinese, including the former's decision to send in troops to Doklam to block Chinese construction there as well as India's road construction in the Galwan River Valley.

Even more critically, Chinese threat assessment of India has gone up because of India's growing strategic relations with the United States, Japan, and Australia. Competition between China and India has heated up in recent years, as the result of rising nationalism in both countries

and the muscular foreign policies of both President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Indo-Pacific strategy, the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, India's activities in Southeast Asia, and China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean and South Asia have expanded the arena for engagement and competition between the two sides. Their interests are competing and overlapping, intensifying the rivalry between them. The COVID-19 pandemic and the race between the two sides to provide vaccines for developing countries have further worsened the rivalry and hostility between the two countries. Increasing competition between them and recent border clashes do not augur well for the management of their water dispute. The efforts of the two governments to desecuritize the water dispute and to prevent overall deteriorating relations from spilling over into the water dispute is increasingly untenable. ■

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Notes

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² Michael C. Williams, “Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2003), 523.

³ Cited in Sebastian Biba, “Desecuritization in China’s Be-
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⁴ Cited in Satu Limaye, “The Middle Riparian Quandaries:
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⁵ Selina Ho, Neng Qian, and Yifei Yan, “The Role of Ideas
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⁶ Aaron T. Wolf, “Conflict and Cooperation along Interna-
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