



Policy Brief

India's Water Divide: Impact of the Teesta River Dispute on Dhaka-Delhi Relations

Maryum Tamoor
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“India’s Water Divide: Impact of the Teesta River Dispute on Dhaka-Delhi Relations”

Executive Summary

Overview

Bangladesh and India share almost 54 rivers, and India has control over the water-sharing of 43 rivers. Sharing the Teesta River’s water has remained a recurrent challenge. Almost 90 per cent of the river’s flow is during June to September, and the remaining flow is during the dry season. As a lower riparian, Dhaka is completely dependent on India (the upper riparian) to keep a regular flow. During the monsoon season, the flow is so high that it leads to floods and in the lean season, the water is scarce. The problem is aggravated due to the construction of dams, further reducing the water flow in the dry seasons, affecting the lives of 30 million people, 71 per cent of whom are located in Bangladesh. Several steps have been taken to resolve the dispute, starting from the 1972 Joint Rivers Commission (JRC), 1983 ad hoc arrangement (India given 39 per cent and Bangladesh 36 per cent and 25 unallocated), to the landmark 2011 agreement allocating 37.5 per cent of the water to Bangladesh and 42.5 per cent to India in the dry season. However, the dispute still persists due to the domestic politics of India. As water is a state subject, the West Bengal government has been a major stumbling block in settling, along with the Indian central government’s approach of using the Teesta dispute as a ‘bargaining chip’ to gain broader strategic objectives. The corollary is an eroded trust between the two states, which was not evident due to Sheikh Hasina’s close relations with Delhi. India in 2024 also reflected a shift from dispute resolution to a technical approach, expressing a will to invest in this project. However, the fall of Hasina’s government strained the relations between the two countries. With her ouster, the chasms are visible in the form of the protests demanding to resolve this dispute. In light of this, the Bangladesh interim government has expedited the Teesta Mega Project in collaboration with China. Started in 2016, this project has been structured as a phased process, and Dhaka has requested Beijing for \$500 million loan to begin the first phase. This has raised concerns in India, particularly as Bangladesh’s growing relations with Pakistan add another dimension to the issue. Both Bangladesh and Pakistan being lower riparian states, face the challenge of India exploiting its position

as an upper riparian. In this context, following are some recommendations for Pakistan to collaborate with Bangladesh in developing joint strategies and policy responses.

Policy Recommendations

- Since India exploits its position as an upper riparian, which is against international norms, Pakistan and Bangladesh can jointly raise this issue on international forums, such as the United Nations (UN).
- Given that both Bangladesh and Pakistan, along with other South Asian states, such as the Maldives and Sri Lanka, are vulnerable to climate change and its consequences, a joint regional initiative, “South Asian Water Dialogue” (SAWD), should be established to foster a culture of dialogue, address climate-related challenges, and promote regional cooperation.
- Allowing their respective foreign offices to lead, Bangladesh and Pakistan should work together to identify the grounds for tabling a resolution at the UNGA, in line with climate justice, international water law, and the ‘no-harm principle.’ The resolution should propose greater cooperation through joint efforts under the auspices of the UN to encourage upper riparian states to engage with lower riparian states in good faith, while discouraging unilateral exploitation of shared waters. This should align with the spirit of customary international law and the relevant UN Conventions, such as the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses of 1997 and the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes of 1992, to which Bangladesh has acceded.
- Pakistan and Bangladesh should consider initiating crop-swapping in order to reduce pressure on water-scarce areas, paving the way for food security and enhanced cooperation. Pakistan can supply wheat, pulses, and maize during Bangladesh’s dry/winter (Rabi) season. In return, Bangladesh can export winter vegetables, such as onions, garlic, chilli, and hybrid lentils to Pakistan, which it imports in large quantities.

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Overview

Water has been a focal point in shaping relations between Bangladesh and India. Out of a total of almost 700 rivers, Bangladesh shares 54 transboundary rivers with India, of which India has control over the water sharing of 43 rivers¹. These rivers are essential for irrigation purposes and agricultural production. However, the mechanism for water sharing and distribution, particularly in the case of the Teesta River, represents a bottleneck in relations between the two states.

Issue.

To analyse the historical and contemporary dynamics of the Teesta water-sharing dispute, the challenges to its resolution, and its impact on relations between Bangladesh and India.

Analysis

Hydrological Profile of the Teesta River

Situated in the North Sikkim Himalayas, the Teesta River originates from the Tso Lhamo Lake, which is primarily fed by the Khangse, Chho Lhamo, and Pahunri glaciers. It then flows through Sikkim and West Bengal, and enters Bangladesh’s Jalpaiguri and Rangpur Division before pouring into the Brahmaputra River as a tributary at Fulcherry. It is Bangladesh’s fourth-largest transboundary river, a perennial river which is 414km in length and is maintained by both glacial melt and rainfall. Its catchment area is 12,160km², 83 per cent (10,155km²) of which lies in Sikkim, India²

¹ Shrabony Akter, “Water Diplomacy between Bangladesh and India,” *Centre for Governance Studies*, November 1, 2022, <https://cgs-bd.com/article/9680/Water-Diplomacy-Between-Bangladesh-and-India>.

² Shampa a,*, Israt Jahan Nejhuma,b, Md. Manjurul Hussaina, Mohammad Muddassir Islama and Rubaid Hassan Zohaa, “Evaluating 2021 extreme flash flood of Teesta River,” *Hydrology Research*, 54, no. 10 (2023).

and 16 per cent (2,004km²) in Bangladesh. Its flow varies with the seasons. A map showing the origin and flow of the river is given in the Annexe.

On average, the Teesta River carries 60 billion cubic metres (BCM) of water annually. 54 BCM, which is approximately 90 per cent of its flow, is during the Monsoon season, i.e. from June to September. In the remaining months, i.e. October to April/May, the water flow is almost 6BCM annually, which is 500 million cubic meters (MCM) monthly on average³. It is in this lean/dry season (October-April/May), when there is a water shortage. As a lower riparian, Bangladesh, therefore, is dependent on India (the upper riparian) and hence the demand for fair water sharing, especially during the dry season when the water flow is even below the natural environmental flow required by the river. Below is a table that illustrates the water flow dynamics of the Teesta River and the impact of seasonal variability⁴.

Parameter	Annual Average	Monsoon (June-September)	Lean Season (October-April/May)	Due to the Construction of Barrages (Dry Season)
Flow (m ³ /s)	1900	7900	283	28-14
Volume (BCM)	60	54-249	8.9	0.44-0.88
Total Annual Volume (%)	100	~90	~10	<2
Comments	Total runoff of the river, and	Abundant water in this season and	Low flow, water scarcity, is	Barrages reduce the water supply,

³ Imran Khan, Dr Mostafa Ali, "Potential Changes to the Water Balance of the Teesta River Basin Due to Climate Change," *American Journal of Water Resources*, 7, no. 3 (2019): 95-105.

⁴ Abdul Waheed Parry, "Teesta River Dispute between India and Bangladesh," *InSamer*, January 24, 2020, <https://en.insamer.com/uploads/pdf/commentary-teesta-river-dispute-between-india-and-bangladesh.pdf>.

	average flow in a year	the possibility of floods	critical for Bangladesh	and the dispute intensifies
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The Teesta Dispute between Bangladesh and India

The dispute is centred on equitable and fair water sharing of the river. The Teesta Basin is home to nearly 30 million people, and its population continues to grow. A major section of this populace, 71 per cent (9.5 million people), is in North Bangladesh, then 27 per cent in Northern West Bengal (India), and 2 per cent in Sikkim⁵. Approximately 21 million Bangladeshis are dependent on the Teesta water⁶ for their livelihood. The construction of barrages has added another dimension to this dispute as they reduce the water flow and transportation of sedimentation load, and cause morphological transformations such as altering the natural river bed (for instance, over the past ten years, the Teesta riverbed rose to 2.5 feet upstream due to sedimentation upstream and downstream sections eroded)⁷.

There are at least forty-seven Indian hydropower projects on the Teesta⁸ and one barrage built in the 1990s called the Gazoldoba Barrage in West Bengal, and one constructed by Bangladesh called the Teesta Barrage at Dalia. The Indian barrage in West Bengal is estimated to have reduced the water flow to Bangladesh by 3000-4000 cumecs⁹. These barrages allow India to store, divert, and release water for irrigation, hydropower production, and other purposes, reducing the water flow to Bangladesh in the dry seasons and causing flash floods during the monsoons with little or no early warning. The devastating flood of 2021 in Bangladesh, which affected 120,000 people, is a case in point, along with earlier floods in 2015, 2000, the 1990s, and the 1970s¹⁰.

⁵ Abdul Waheed Parry, "Teesta River Dispute between India and Bangladesh."

⁵ Md Fakrul Islam, *Water Use and Poverty Reduction* (Japan: Springer, 2016), 37.

⁶ Abdul Waheed Parry, "Teesta River Dispute between India and Bangladesh."

⁷ Md. Sanaul H. Mondal and Md. Serajul Islam, "Chronological trends in maximum and minimum water flows of the Teesta River, Bangladesh, and its implications," *Jàmbá - Journal of Disaster Risk Studies*, 9, no. 1 (2017): 1-11.

⁸ Muhammad Mizanur Rahaman; Abdullah - Al – Mamun, "Hydropower development along Teesta river basin: opportunities for cooperation," *Water Policy*, 22, no. 4 (2020): 641–657.

⁹ Md. Shariful Islam, *Fifty Years of Bangladesh-India Relations* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2022).

¹⁰ Shampa, Israt Jahan Nejhuma, et.al. "Evaluating 2021 extreme flash flood of Teesta River," *Hydrology Research*, 54 no. 10 (2023).

Implications of the Dispute for Bangladesh

Irregular water flow in different seasons has severe implications for Bangladesh; some are listed below:

- Reduced water flow during the lean season leads to many lands being left uncultivated, impacting the agricultural yield.
- Irregular water flow has compelled the farmers to choose crops, such as tobacco and maize, which require relatively less water but are also less profitable.
- With canals running dry, irrigation is adversely impacted, resulting in vast tracts of land uncultivated.
- Reduced water flow causes droughts in the dry season, and extreme flow in the monsoon causes floods.
- More desertification of the Teesta Basin.
- Floods damage the crops, impacting the overall yield.
- Destruction of the infrastructure due to flash floods in monsoons.
- Low water flow poses risks to the marine life and aquatic biodiversity.
- The reduced water flow has rendered the Teesta Barrage almost ineffective. It then disrupts the irrigation system, and the problem is aggravated by the upstream Gazoldoba Barrage, which diverts water to other rivers¹¹.
- Less agricultural yield perpetuates poverty in agriculture-dependent areas. It further leads to migration to urban areas, fuelling a rise in unemployment.

Efforts and Mechanisms to Resolve the Dispute

A history of negotiations and mechanisms have been adopted to reach a settlement, however, both states have not been able to attain a consensus. In November 1972, a Joint River Commission (JRC) was established to build a liaison between the two governments on the common rivers, joint projects, including irrigation projects, flood control, early warning systems, and equal resource distribution¹². Over 90 meetings (34 on Teesta) were held, but any consensus remains elusive. The Indian plan of the

¹¹ Md Fakrul Islam, *Water Use and Poverty Reduction* (Japan: Springer, 2016).

¹² Abdul Waheed Parry, "Teesta River Dispute between India and Bangladesh," *InSamer*, January 24, 2020, <https://en.insamer.com/uploads/pdf/commentary-teesta-river-dispute-between-india-and-bangladesh.pdf>.

Teesta water diversion to the Mahananda river basin was opposed by Bangladesh, leading to another initiative in July 1983¹³. An ad hoc water arrangement was agreed upon, according to which 36 per cent water flow was allocated to Bangladesh, 39 per cent to India, and 25 per cent was unallocated. This arrangement was left for revision under JRC findings¹⁴. It could not be implemented as Dhaka demanded an increase in its share to 50 per cent, with Delhi resisting it¹⁵. In 1984, premised on the recommendations of the Joint River Water Commission, the new distribution scheme allocated 42.5 per cent to India, 37.5 per cent to Bangladesh, and the remaining 25 per cent to maintain the natural flow of the river¹⁶. However, due to the unequal share, the dispute persisted.

A landmark event, though not specifically related to the Teesta dispute, occurred when both countries signed the Ganges Water Treaty in December 1996. This treaty was centred on the Ganges water at the Farakka Barrage and it served as a gateway of cooperation and possible agreements on the Teesta and related issues¹⁷. It set a precedent and raised Bangladesh's hopes that Teesta might be the next transboundary dispute to be settled. A series of meetings at different intervals was held from 1997 to 2010 without making a headway in the direction of dispute settlement. In August 1997, a JRC Meeting was held at Teesta Barrage Rest House, and both sides negotiated again on Teesta water sharing¹⁸, but inconclusive as the Indian delegation cited the lack of enough hydrological data on Teesta's water flow¹⁹. A Joint Technical Group was established in 2004 to write the terms of reference for a collaborative scientific assessment of the Teesta River and an interim water sharing agreement. In the 4th JTG meeting in 2005, it was stated that the group was unable to

¹³ Md Fakrul Islam, *Water Use and Poverty Reduction* (Japan: Springer, 2016), 9.

¹⁴ Agreement on the ad-hoc sharing of the Teesta Waters between India and Bangladesh reached during the 25th meeting of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission held in July, 1983 at Dhaka," *ECOLEX*, July 20, 1983, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.ecolex.org/details/treaty/agreement-on-the-ad-hoc-sharing-of-the-teesta-waters-between-india-and-bangladesh-reached-during-the-25th-meeting-of-the-indo-bangladesh-joint-rivers-commission-held-in-july-1983-at-dhaka-tre-152460/>.

¹⁵ Japungsar Basumatary, "BANGLADESH-INDIA WATER ISSUE: A Study on Teesta River," *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 5, no. 4 (2018).

¹⁶ Japungsar Basumatary, "BANGLADESH-INDIA WATER ISSUE: A Study on Teesta River."

¹⁷ Saswati Chanda & Alok Kumar Gupta, "The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty: Genesis & Significance," *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, January 20, 2000, https://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=310#:~:text=The%201996%20Indo-Bangladesh%20water%20sharing%20treaty%20has%20opened,Bangladesh%20of%20which%20the%20Ganges%20is%20highly%20seasonal.

¹⁸ Md Fakrul Islam, *Water Use and Poverty Reduction* (Japan: Springer, 2016), 98.

¹⁹ Md Fakrul Islam, *Water Use and Poverty Reduction*.

find a solution. In the 36th JRC meeting, it was added that water in the lean season is not sufficient,²⁰ and both countries have to make a formula based on ‘mutual sacrifices’ for fair water sharing that addresses the needs of people on both sides²¹. Similarly, in September 2007, as a result of a joint meeting, a proposal of water sharing by Bangladesh was presented (20 per cent reserved for the river and the remaining 80 per cent divided equally between the two states)²². India objected to this sharing formula, leading to another Secretary-level meeting in India (New Delhi) on water sharing of the Teesta River, as well as water management of transboundary rivers²³, which took place in March 2010. No agreement was reached because of resistance from the West Bengal government.

Following repeated unsuccessful attempts, a breakthrough was made in September 2011 when a fifteen-year interim Teesta Water Agreement was discussed, putting forward a water-sharing framework with fixed percentages in the dry season (42.5 per cent to India and 37.5 per cent to Bangladesh)²⁴. The proposal, however, did not materialise owing to the opposition from West Bengal’s Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, acting as a veto, citing concerns of water availability and that the subject of water falls within the jurisdiction of the concerned state²⁵. Then in succeeding years, meetings on Teesta were organised within India, and President Pranab Mukherjee also visited Bangladesh. The then Foreign Minister, S.M. Krishna, said that the centre is in talks with the West Bengal government and they are working to reach a consensus on Teesta. The President assured ‘fair and logical solution’ to the Teesta River dispute²⁶. These efforts also did not come to fruition as the Indian side

²⁰ Sanjib Sardar, “TEESTA RIVER DISPUTE AND BILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND BANGLADESH,” *New Horizons*, 25, (2021): 14-26.

²¹ “Teesta Dispute, Facts and Theories,” *Daily Asian Age*, February 12, 2024, <https://dailiasianage.com/news/319698/teesta-dispute-facts-and-theories>.

²² Sanjib Sardar, “TEESTA RIVER DISPUTE AND BILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND BANGLADESH.”

²³ “Crucial water talks begin,” *BD News*, January 4, 2010, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/crucial-water-talks-begin>.

²⁴ Arpon Sarki, “Teesta water sharing conundrum: A litmus test of bilateral trajectory and beyond,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research*, 11, no. 2 (2025): 42-46.

²⁵ Anuttama Banerji, “India Must Settle the Teesta River Dispute With Bangladesh for Lasting Gains,” *The Diplomat*, April 9, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/india-must-settle-the-teesta-river-dispute-with-bangladesh-for-lasting-gains/>.

²⁶ Sanjib Sardar, “TEESTA RIVER DISPUTE AND BILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND BANGLADESH.”

acknowledged domestic political constraints and cited the issue of ignorance of concerns of wider stakeholders²⁷.

In June 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina sought finalisation of the 2011 Teesta agreement, to which Modi said that deliberations with the stakeholders were underway²⁸. No deal was signed, as the discussions on the Teesta dispute appeared to amount to little more than political rhetoric and lip service, leaving the dispute in limbo. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina then visited India in April 2017 and had a meeting with Modi and Mamata Banerjee. Modi proposed an 'early solution' to the Teesta dispute, and Mamata gave an 'alternate proposal,' which outlined water sharing of rivers, including Torsa, Raidak, and Sankosh, along with providing 'electricity²⁹.' No concrete steps by the Indian centre, Mamata's opposition and resistance to Teesta water sharing, and insufficient push from Hasina left the dispute to persist.

Between 2016 and 2025, several developments took place regarding the Teesta Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TCMRP), also known as the Teesta Mega Project. In 2016, a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed, outlining a comprehensive plan for Teesta management, including erosion and flood control, land reclamation, disaster reduction, and the restoration of the transport ecosystem³⁰. While the project idea was introduced and awaited government approval, financing issues persisted, and growing frustration in Bangladesh pushed forward this initiative, simultaneously bringing China into the Teesta equation, which created concerns in India. By 2020, Dhaka sought a \$725 million soft loan from Beijing

²⁷ Sanjib Sardar, "TEESTA RIVER DISPUTE AND BILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND BANGLADESH."

²⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, *Shared Values and Interconnected Destinies: Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Visit to Bangladesh (June 2015)* (New Delhi: MEA, 2015), <https://www.mea.gov.in/Booklet1/bangladesh.htm#>.

²⁹ Indrani Bagchi, "Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina rejects Mamata's plans, wants only Teesta, *Times of India*, April 11, 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/bangladesh-pm-sheikh-hasina-rejects-mamatas-plan-wants-only-teesta/articleshow/58118839.cms>.

³⁰ The project includes, dredging 102 km stretch, reclaiming 171 km² of land, for farming, housing, 203 km embankments, char protection, infrastructure, satellite towns, marine drives, tourism, police or army outposts in reclaimed zones, expanding farmland, improved irrigation, developing 224 km of roads, and building transport & jetty facilities at 82 sites. For more details see Pinaki Roy, S Dilip Roy, "Teesta Plan with China Gains Pace." Also see, Arifur Rehman, "Teesta project: Bangladesh seeks Tk 67 billion Chinese loan," *Prothomalo*, August 19, 2025, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/kp4ytpydf8?>.

for the project, estimated at \$980 million³¹, but financing uncertainties remained. In December 2023, the Chinese Ambassador submitted a revised proposal recommending cost reduction and phased implementation, making the project more feasible³², though it further deepened India's concerns.

Both the chief executives of India and Bangladesh met again in June 2024 and announced a technical team to study the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TRCMRP). Hasina proclaimed that she prefers India over China to fund this project. The proposal stalled due to the July Revolution and the ouster of Sheikh Hasina. In the same year, on June 24, Bangladesh acceded³³ to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes. This Water Convention provides legal, technical, and institutional ways to facilitate cooperation and management of shared water sources³⁴. Bangladesh has accepted the Convention in full and is legally bound by it. Since India is not a party to the Convention, it is not legally bound. However, this move is significant as it points towards a shift in Dhaka's approach; i.e. a move away from bilateralism (with India on water) to multilateral water governance.

In January 2025, an MoU extension was signed by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and the Power Construction Corporation of China (PowerChina), with PowerChina tasked to prepare a concept paper by December 2025 and conduct a feasibility study in 2026 to finalise the project, extending the review process³⁵. This also highlighted the growing influence of China in Bangladesh, perceived by India as a strategic concern given the project's proximity to the 'Chicken Neck'. Most recently, in July–August 2025, Dhaka and Beijing sought to expedite the project, with Bangladesh requesting \$550 million (out of \$750 million for the first phase) from China following the Bangladesh Planning Commission's review and

³¹ Devipura Mitra, "Sheikh Hasina in New Delhi: India to Send Technical Team to Evaluate Bangladesh's Teesta Project," *The Wire*, June 22, 2024, https://51.159.195.37/diplomacy/sheikh-hasina-in-new-delhi-india-to-send-technical-team-to-evaluate-bangladeshs-teesta-project?__cpo=aHR0cHM6Ly90aGV3aXJlmlu.

³² Pinaki Roy, S Dilip Roy, "Teesta Plan with China Gains Pace," *The Daily Star*, February 19, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/teesta-plan-china-gains-pace-3827991>.

³³ Stellina Joly, "Water as a Multilateral Issue? The Case of Bangladesh and Implications for Indian Diplomacy," *South Asian Voice*, August 14, 2025, <https://southasianvoices.org/geo-f-in-n-bangladesh-india-water-diplomacy-08-14-2025/>.

³⁴ "FAQs: Added Value at Global, Transboundary, and National Scales," *UNECE*, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://unece.org/environment-policy/water/about-the-convention/faqs>.

³⁵ Pinaki Roy, S Dilip Roy, "Teesta Plan with China Gains Pace."

approval of the preliminary cost³⁶. The proposal was sent to the Economic Relations Division (ERD) for further action, and while the Chinese government said that they have not received a formal loan request yet³⁷. Though moving at a slow pace, both sides expressed intent for early implementation, keeping the project's prospects alive.

Constraints to Dispute Resolution and Its Impacts

As the developments shown in the above table highlight, so far, no treaty or any official agreement for Teesta water sharing has been signed between Bangladesh and India. It is also evident that one of the most seminal challenges has been opposition from the West Bengal government. Its position is that the Teesta water is the only source of irrigation for Northern Bengal. The second contention that has been stated is that there are floods during the monsoon, and in the dry season, water is scarce in West Bengal³⁸. Therefore, any agreement that does not seem to be in the 'state interest' will not be acceptable. Moreover, there is a visible lack of will and any concrete steps from the Indian central government, after Manmohan Singh (2011 Interim Teesta Agreement), to resolve the dispute.

India also uses this dispute as a bargaining tool to gain strategic leverage in its relations with Bangladesh. This pattern is reflected in the last three meetings between Hasina and Modi, where the Teesta water sharing dispute was relegated to a rhetorical gesture, while defence and border agreements took precedence.

Resultantly, the relations which are otherwise good in trade, connectivity, defence, political, and cultural realms are gridlocked in water diplomacy. India's shift to a technical approach (funding the Teesta project instead of focusing on a Teesta water-sharing treaty) has intensified impatience in Bangladesh regarding any future river-related initiatives. Moreover, with the fall of Hasina's regime, the trust has eroded further, and the people of Bangladesh have taken to the streets, demanding equitable water sharing of the Teesta River. One such protest in the form of a 48-hour sit-in was

³⁶ Arifur Rehman, "Teesta project: Bangladesh seeks Tk 67 billion Chinese loan."

³⁷ Arifur Rehman, "Teesta project: Bangladesh seeks Tk 67 billion Chinese loan."

³⁸ Jayatri Nag, "West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee expresses concern over Teesta river," *The Economic Times*, July 8, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/west-bengal-cm-mamata-banerjee-expresses-concern-over-teesta-river/articleshow/111585117.cms>.

held in February this year by the Teesta River Protection Movement, echoing the demand for Teesta water sharing³⁹.

The China Variable

India's centre-state veto politics blocking its regional diplomacy has proven to be a fertile ground for another variable to be added in this bilateral equation, i.e. China. The Teesta Mega Project announced by China has the capacity to change the water dynamics as it entails dredging, construction of embankments, and infrastructure development that can influence the water flow by enhancing the storage capacity (saving the monsoon water and releasing it in the dry season), along with improving irrigation, controlling flooding and protecting the farming land. Since the Teesta is a transboundary river, this project's capacity is limited as India controls the flow downstream. The project can help in storing the excess monsoon water, but it cannot solve the problem of water shortage in the lean season. Nevertheless, Teesta's hydrology and geography are strategically significant. The Teesta Mega Project lies near the 'Chicken Neck' or Siliguri Corridor, which is a thin land strip of 20-22km in width, serving as a link between India's North-eastern (7 sisters) states and the mainland. This raises alarm bells for India, as this region is considered to be its most vulnerable region strategically. This heightens concerns, as this project, along with others, is perceived as evidence of China's growing influence in Bangladesh and Dhaka's increasing tilt towards Beijing.

Similar to Bangladesh, Pakistan also has its share of experience as a lower riparian state. Although there is a stark difference, as Pakistan has a water sharing treaty with India (Indus Waters Treaty, IWT) that does not have any state-level veto, and unlike Teesta (where China is in an upstream position), China is not directly an upper riparian, certain parallels with the Teesta dispute can be observed. Like Bangladesh, Islamabad has a water-sharing dispute with India, exacerbated by India, exploiting its position as an upper riparian and connecting water diplomacy with politics. Another factor is China's growing ties with Bangladesh and Pakistan, mirroring the evolving dynamics of South Asian politics in general and hydropolitics in particular.

³⁹ "Protest march: Demand for fair share of Teesta River gets louder," *Dhaka Tribune*, February 18, 2025, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/374062/protest-march-demand-for-fair-share-of-teesta>.

Policy Recommendations

- Since India exploits its position as an upper riparian, which is against international norms, Pakistan and Bangladesh can jointly raise this issue on international forums, such as the United Nations (UN).
- Given that both Bangladesh and Pakistan, along with other South Asian states, such as the Maldives and Sri Lanka, are vulnerable to climate change and its consequences, a joint regional initiative, “South Asian Water Dialogue” (SAWD), should be established to foster a culture of dialogue, address climate-related challenges, and promote regional cooperation.
- Allowing their respective foreign offices to lead, Bangladesh and Pakistan should work together to identify the grounds for tabling a resolution at the UNGA, in line with climate justice, international water law, and the ‘no-harm principle.’ The resolution should propose greater cooperation through joint efforts under the auspices of the UN to encourage upper riparian states to engage with lower riparian states in good faith, while discouraging unilateral exploitation of shared waters. This should align with the spirit of customary international law and the relevant UN Conventions, such as the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses of 1997 and the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes of 1992, to which Bangladesh has acceded.
- Pakistan and Bangladesh should consider initiating crop-swapping in order to reduce pressure on water-scarce areas, paving the way for food security and enhanced cooperation. Pakistan can supply wheat, pulses, and maize during Bangladesh’s dry/winter (Rabi) season. In return, Bangladesh can export winter vegetables, such as onions, garlic, chilli, and hybrid lentils to Pakistan, which it imports in large quantities.

Annexure

