
The increasing geopolitical power of China and India has aroused anxiety, controversy, and excitement around the world. The so-called ‘rise of Asia’ in the past two decades is complex and multi-faceted, but most analyses focus on the galloping rate of economic growth or the fast-paced militarization of China and India. Brahma Chellaney takes a different approach in his book, *Water: Asia’s New Battleground*, by analyzing the fissures between Asian states over shared water resources, particularly rivers. Chellaney argues that water disputes threaten not only the collective rise of Asia as a responsible world power, but also foreshadow a type of conflict other regions will experience with increasing frequency and intensity.

Chellaney’s objective is to provide a systematic analysis of water and peace that spans the entire continent of Asia. Given the ambitious nature of this task, not to mention the issues with employing ‘Asia’ as an analytical category, Chellaney’s failure to meet his stated objective is not surprising. The book brings together compelling data on topics as diverse as the links between food, water, and the global economy, the cultural history of Tibet, and the importance of biological diversity. But notwithstanding these contributions, as well as the detailed descriptions of various transboundary river systems, from the Jordan to the Indus to the Han and many others, Chellaney’s book ultimately fails to provide a compelling theoretical framework that helps make sense of and establish connections between these complex aspects of different hydro-political systems. The most cohesive contribution of the book is its geopolitical analysis of Chinese water development in the Tibetan plateau, especially as it relates to Indian security. This review focuses on that theme.

Chellaney’s analysis of China-India relations rests on a sharp distinction between Chinese and Indian models of water development. This distinction, which Chellaney characterizes as one between “authoritarian capitalism” and “liberal democracy” (p. 54) is fleshed out through comparative historical analysis in Chapter 2: Murky Hydropolitics. China,
according to Chellaney, is living with Mao Zedong’s legacy: a model of development that emphasizes the domination of nature through grandiose applications of technology and insensitivity to the actual needs of people. Chellaney traces the origins of many of China’s well-known water development projects, including the South-North Water Transfer Project and the Three Gorges Dam, to Mao’s era. These projects had (or are projected to have) disastrous consequences for the environment and for displaced populations. For Chellaney, they are emblematic of the brash and aggressive model of Chinese water development in the domestic sphere, and differ sharply from the model of water development in India.

The “fragmented” approach taken by the Indian state is seen by Chellaney as “exactly the opposite of China’s highly centralized, megaprojects-driven approach” (p. 75). Chellaney bemoans the lack of an integrated and cohesive approach to water development in India. He points out that not only is water primarily a state-level subject in India’s federalism, but that even on the national level twelve different ministries share responsibility for different aspects of water development. In contrast to China, which has quickly developed water resources on a massive level, Chellaney sees India’s fragmented and unorganized approach resulting only in an “underfunded and heavily bureaucratized water sector, poor water planning, rising water pollution, and growing water stress” (p. 82). The stark contrast Chellaney sees between Chinese and Indian styles of water development in the domestic sphere is mirrored by the differences he perceives between the two states in the international sphere.

Indian and Chinese differences in international engagement over transboundary waters are explicated through their history with water treaties. While India has entered into water treaties with Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh, China has not signed a water treaty with any state, and has active water disputes with at least nine of its neighbors. Chellaney’s interpretation of customary international watercourse law is that the upper-riparian has first right to exploit water resources when unencumbered by binding treaties (p. 185). According to this interpretation, as long as China avoids entering into water treaties, it can exploit its position as an upper-riparian with the full support of customary international law. Chellaney argues that India’s “romanticism in foreign policy”, a vestige of the idealistic Jawaharlal Nehru’s seventeen years in office, has gotten in the way of developing a pragmatic foreign policy like that of China (p.79). Chellaney’s evaluation of Chinese and Indian models of development in both the domestic and international spheres is thus ambiguous. While he portrays the democratic and liberal style of Indian water
development favorably as it contrasts with the Chinese autocratic model, he ruefully notes the disadvantages of the Indian approach. In doing so, he seems to express a wistful hope that India’s water situation would improve if its management scheme were only more like China’s.

Chellaney’s analysis and evaluation, however, are precariously balanced on the questionable idea that China and India have pursued significantly different styles of water development. A more accurate way to compare Indian and Chinese water development would be as embodiments, albeit to different degrees, of a remarkably similar type of capitalist upstream water development. Interestingly, characteristics that Chellaney associates exclusively with Chinese water development have also been observed in India. These include autocracy, an obsession with engineering prowess, a disregard for displaced cultures and populations, and a realpolitik foreign policy towards downstream riparian states (Roy 1999; Singh 2002; Wirsing and Jasparro 2007). Both the Chinese and Indian states have embraced the practice of dam building and riparian control as a means to modern development. Indeed, reckless dam building cannot be limited to the particularities of any specific state - it was, and continues to be, a defining characteristic of the cultural economy of many states over much of the past century. This state cultural economy melds state developmentalism and global capitalism with an instrumental view of nature (Klingensmith 2007). By viewing the hydropolitics of China and India through a rigid dichotomy, Chellaney fails to connect the domestic water development paradigms of the two states as constituent parts of the same structure. Unfortunately, this means the most important analytical thrust of Chellaney’s book, the hydropolitical relationship between China and India, resembles a conventional security analysis.

There is no doubt that Brahma Chellaney’s book contains a wealth of carefully referenced data about water conflicts throughout Asia. But the theoretical and analytical tools he employs to analyze this mass of information are less than satisfying. Portions of his book deal with the Middle East, Korea, and Central Asia, and touch on interesting topics like the intersection of territorial disputes, transboundary conflicts, and minority populations. But it is not clear how these sections fit with the main thrust of the book--the geopolitical implications for India of Chinese water development on the Tibetan Plateau. Furthermore, the theoretical frameworks undergirding Chellaney’s analysis, which are never discussed and must therefore be intuited by the reader, are that of strict realism in the analysis of inter-state engagement and a neo-Malthusian, population-centric understanding of natural resource scarcity. The use of these
frameworks, without exposition or explicit engagement, will prove uninspiring to political ecologists and critical geographers. That being said, the chapters dealing with the hydrological significance of Tibet and Chinese water development plans are very informative and well-researched. Chellaney’s *Water: Asia’s Next Battleground* will be useful primarily for those who desire a descriptive overview of the major Asian water disputes, and for those who wish to gain insight into how a prominent figure of the Indian security/scholarly establishment understands the water development activities of China.

**References**


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*May 2012*