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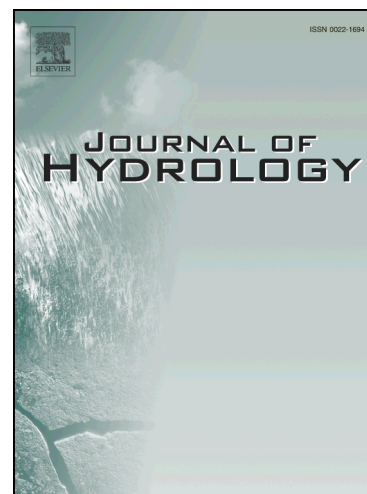
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**Water Diplomacy as an approach to regional cooperation in South Asia:  
A case from the Brahmaputra Basin**

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**Water Diplomacy as an approach to regional cooperation in South Asia:**

**A case from the Brahmaputra Basin**

Abstract

The Yarlung Zangbo-Brahmaputra – Jamuna river basin (*further referred to as Brahmaputra River Basin*) is one of the most important river systems in South Asia. It originates on the Tibetan Plateau and links Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, and India. Despite being an important river system of South Asia, with an immense potential for regional development, very little progress has been made so far at regional level to manage this transboundary river. Apart from stereotypical upstream-downstream syndromes, a lack of trust, an atmosphere of hostility, and an asymmetric information and power situation as also the absence of regional principles or frameworks make transboundary interaction between the Brahmaputra riparian countries complex and challenging. The lack of information and knowledge regarding the river itself makes decision-making further complicated. Negotiation for a basin-wide treaty on cooperation in the absence of trust is a non-starter for the Brahmaputra basin, for it may result in asymmetric cooperation, opening up ground for future conflicts. To avoid such asymmetric cooperation, information-rich, multilateral informal dialogues need to take place to develop an accepted definition of cooperation, which meets the needs of all riparian states.

The article provides an outline of the current issues in the Brahmaputra river basin and illustrates the need for multitrack and multi-stakeholder dialogues in the Brahmaputra region. The paper is inspired by the ‘Brahmaputra Dialogue’ project

initiated in 2013, that demonstrates that water diplomacy has to be an inclusive, open, and transparent process involving multiple actors, because such interaction facilitates sustainable water cooperation, not only between riparian countries but also between riparian communities.

Key words: Water diplomacy, Transboundary cooperation, Brahmaputra River Basin, Multi-stakeholder dialogues

## 1. Introduction

The Yarlung Zangbo-Brahmaputra – Jamuna river basin (further referred to as Brahmaputra River Basin) is one of the unique river systems of South Asia. The river is the fourth largest in the world in terms of annual discharge. It originates in Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China, has a basin drainage area of 580,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and empties into the Bay of Bengal (Ray *et al.*, 2015). It is shared between four countries - China (50.5% of the total basin area), India (33.6%), Bangladesh (8.1%), and Bhutan (7.8%). In spite of being an important river system of South Asia, with an immense potential for regional development, very little progress has been made so far at regional level to manage this transboundary river. To date, no international treaty exists for the management of the Brahmaputra basin, involving all the four basin countries. There are a few bilateral agreements or Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), which had been devised to address specific water-related issues such as flood forecasting and data sharing. Any agreement on the Brahmaputra related to a basin-wide management of the river has been difficult to negotiate, since there is no multilateral regional platform for such a discussion to take place.

The river is also inseparably linked with regional politics, which are dynamic and keep evolving, thereby opening or closing windows of opportunities for cooperation.

Since the Brahmaputra is particularly politically sensitive, it has led to a ‘securitisation<sup>1</sup>’ of water and a certain inaccessibility of even basic information about the river, including stream and sediment flow, water withdrawal, and usage (Surie and Prasai, 2015). This has created an atmosphere of mistrust, hostility, and suspicion between the riparian countries, hindering cooperative water sharing initiatives at basin level.

More than 100 million people live in the Brahmaputra basin, most of them farmers. The economic structure of the region is highly water-dependent with a vast majority of the people depending for their livelihoods on agriculture, livestock, forestry, fisheries, and industries (textile, handloom, and apparel) located on the river bank.

The river is the primary water source for the basin communities many of whom are mired in chronic poverty. Yet, the potential of the Brahmaputra river basin (BRB) for poverty reducing is immense. The river provides opportunities for irrigation development, livelihood enhancement, and operations such as inland water navigation and hydropower development (Barua, Vij, and Zulfiquir Rahman, 2017). Proponents of this view believe that the benefits foregone by the four countries by not using the water as an engine for economic and regional development have been very substantial (Verghese, 1990, 2007), particularly considering the extensive and abject poverty in all these basin countries (Biswas, 2011). But those who contest this view, argue that current, dominant modes of development (especially development of hydropower and river linking projects) are risky, unsustainable, and inequitable. Also, they are unjust - socially, ecologically, and economically (Dore, 2014). The absence of an authoritative, reliable, and comprehensive network of scientific information about the basin (Biswas, 2011) further complicates decision-making, particularly related to

<sup>1</sup> Refers to requiring a remedy to protect a resource, i.e. to securitise it in national interest - like dam building to capture water resource (Allan and Mirumachi, 2010).

water infrastructure development in the region. This has been leading to questionable outcomes and creating suspicion and mistrust between riparian communities.

All transboundary cooperation, as Selby (2003, 2013) and Zeitoun and Warner (2006) observe, is not always a good thing. In most cases, such cooperation is skewed and will benefit only the powerful riparians. Cooperation through asymmetric treaties (like for the Nile, Jordan, Ganges) has become a source of conflict rather than of cooperation (Cascao and Zeitoun, 2010). Therefore, negotiation for a treaty for cooperation in the absence of trust and without recognising the power asymmetry between riparians, is a non-starter for the BRB, for it may result in asymmetric cooperation and may open up ground for conflicts. To avoid such asymmetric cooperation, information-rich, multilateral dialogues need to take place to develop an accepted definition of cooperation, which meets the needs of co-riparian states.

In the case of transboundary water, conflict and cooperation are not mutually exclusive, they operate in continuum (Sadoff, and Grey, 2005; Zeitoun and Mirumachi, 2008). Therefore, such multilateral dialogues and deliberations also help understand *who* and *what* drives cooperation between states. Hence, it may be argued that the absence of a regional-level treaty for the BRB is precisely an opportunity for multilateral and multi-stakeholder water diplomacy - to construct a path to more effective transboundary water cooperation in the future. This article provides an outline of the current issues in the BRB and illustrates the need for multitrack and multi-stakeholder dialogues in the Brahmaputra region. It is inspired by the 'Brahmaputra Dialogue' project initiated in 2013 by SaciWATERs (a non-governmental organisation based in India), involving the four riparian countries of the BRB.

The article is structured in five sections. After the introduction section, the second section discusses the relevance of water diplomacy in the context of transboundary water cooperation. Section three provides an outline of the current issues in the BRB. Section four, drawing from the Brahmaputra Dialogue process, illustrates the need for multitrack and multi-stakeholder dialogues in the Brahmaputra region for regional cooperation in Brahmaputra basin. The conclusion is presented in section five.

## **2. Water diplomacy and transboundary waters**

Water resource planning and management has become increasingly complex due to natural, social, and political networks attached to water and competing interests of different groups (Hossain 2013). When water is shared by two or more sovereign states, it further complicates the situation, as the potential and incentive for each sovereign state to cooperate vary widely. When negotiation for cooperation takes place undermining these differences between riparian countries, it often leads to a zero-sum problem (i. e., one party's loss is another's gain).

*Water Diplomacy* recognises this inherent limitation of current practices in water-sharing negotiations and advocate a non-zero-sum approach (i.e., a situation where both parties receive a net gain) (Islam and Susskind, 2013). Water diplomacy is not about negotiating on conflict issues; rather, it helps establish relationships to (re)build trust between conflict-prone parties. In doing so it helps prevent further conflicts and make change more sustainable (Wehrenfennig, 2008).

On a transboundary level, this particular diplomacy is most often used to prevent conflict escalation and to improve cooperation (Huntjens and de Man, 2017). It helps in communicating at different levels and between different parties, (representatives of states, civil society, academia, etc.), in establishing connections, and in building trust. It may include formal or informal dialogues between high-level diplomatic

delegations of riparian states or developing people-to-people relationships at grassroots level. It is a dynamic process that seeks to develop reasonable, sustainable, and peaceful solutions to water allocation and management while promoting or influencing regional cooperation and collaboration (Huntjens, Lebel, and Furze, 2015).

While, traditionally, diplomacy is defined as high-level interaction and dialogue between nation-states, in the present context, the definition has broadened to include various other levels as well (Wehrenfennig, 2008).

- Track 1 diplomacy (official / traditional diplomacy): Dialogues between officials, which mostly include politicians and high-ranking military personnel in a nation – state centred perspective.
- Track 1.5 diplomacy: ‘Diplomatic initiatives that are facilitated by unofficial bodies, but directly involve officials from the conflict in question’ (Nan 2005, p. 165).
- Track 2 diplomacy: As defined by Montville (1991, p.162), is ‘unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations, who can interact more freely than high-ranking officials, aim to develop strategies, to influence public opinion, organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict’.
- Track 3 diplomacy: People-to-people diplomacy undertaken by individuals and private groups to encourage interaction and understanding between hostile communities and involving awareness raising and empowerment within these communities.

In transboundary contexts, due to the complexity related to allocation and management of water resources, a Track 1 diplomacy alone is not sufficient to bring

about cooperation among sovereign states. While this diplomacy has the ability to use political power to influence the direction of negotiations and outcomes (Sanders, 1991), the conflict resolution approaches are corrupted by power. The power asymmetry between riparian countries makes Track 1 diplomacy a liability to durable peace rather than a facilitating tool (Mapendere, 2008).

There is also a level of secrecy maintained during Track 1 dialogues and interactions, because officials cannot speak against their countries' interests. This acts as an obstacle to open discussion and dialogues, leading to speculation as also to undermining issues important to the weaker party.

Track 2 diplomacy tries to include more people (influential academic, religious, and NGO leaders, and other civil society actors) than just the figureheads in governments. It is more concerned with re-establishing relationships between the parties to the conflict than bargaining over specifics (Wahrenfennig, 2016). It may also be described as informal discussions between government and non-government stakeholders facilitated by a neutral third party (Hanasz, 2017). As Dore (2014) points out, 'Track 2 refers to state-civil society interactive forums that have emerged as complementary or parallel forums [to Track 1], which generally aim to enhance the effectiveness of state processes.'

Track 3 diplomacy aims to bring together the voices and concerns of riparian communities through dialogues and interactions for improved local governance. These are mostly, unofficial, dialogue and problem-solving activities, which aim at building relationships and encouraging new thinking that can guide the official process. These approaches are mostly supplements to or extensions of existing state diplomacy (Track 1) (Wahrenfennig, 2008).

Track 1.5 is important because it complements Track 1 and Track 2 and its representatives fill in the gap between the two tracks (Mapendere, 2008), particularly when a direct high-level approach is not possible. It facilitates communication between leaders, where for historical reasons or some conflicting situation formal communication between the parties is not appreciated or just not feasible.

When these different levels of diplomacy are activated simultaneously, it is known as 'multitrack diplomacy' (Dore, 2007). This incorporates all aspects of mediation, from ground-level work of private citizens to top-level meetings of state heads. This is because multitrack diplomacy recognises that political power is not concentrated only in a national government. Instead, it is shared across multiple levels with multiple actors (Smith, 1999).

While a Track 2 dialogue aims to build trust between riparian countries primarily through information exchange, the absence of trust between riparians and a lack of political will often undermine that effort (Hanasz 2017). As a consequence, the outcome of such 'linear' diplomacy is often uncertain and unpredictable. Multitrack diplomacy, as an extension of Tracks 1, 2, and 3 diplomacy, by utilising all levels of society, helps determine the needs and facilitate communication between all these levels (Diamond and McDonald, 1996).

Multitrack diplomacy efforts could be led by a government or by a third party - professional organisations, businesses, religious bodies, media, private citizens, training and educational institutes, activists, and donors. For transboundary river basins, a shift of gear from formal to informal multitrack diplomacy has started to gain importance, because such diplomacy allows debate and discussion, which helps bring about reasonable and well-informed opinions. Such deliberative processes make

water governance fairer and more effective, also helps reducing power imbalances among stakeholders, making negotiations transparent and informed (Dore, 2014).

### 3. The Brahmaputra River Basin

#### 3.1 The Brahmaputra River Basin and Geopolitics

Brahmaputra has a total length of 2,880 kilometres, with a drainage area of around 573,394 square kilometres (Rahaman and Varis, 2009). Of the 1350 billion cubic metres (BCM) annually discharged by the Ganges–Yarlung Zangbo/Brahmaputra–Meghna river basin, the Yarlung Zangbo/Brahmaputra River contributes approximately 700 BCM (Liu, 2015). The annual flow of water from China to India is 165.4 BCM, from Bhutan tributaries<sup>2</sup> to India 78 BCM, and from India to Bangladesh 537.24 BCM (FAO, 2011 b). The basin is rich in biodiversity as well as ethnic diversity. It has a varied terrain and climate with a high seasonal variability of river flow. The river is highly dynamic and unpredictable and also susceptible to sudden channel migration and avulsion, making it a highly complex water system (Ray, 2015).

#### Figure 1: Map of Brahmaputra Basin

[Insert here]

**Source:** Institute of Water Modelling, Bangladesh

Like other South Asian rivers, the Brahmaputra is inseparably linked with the regional politics involving four riparian countries, unequal in both size and power. All these riparians are in various stages of development, with a major portion of their population living below the poverty line. Each riparian, therefore, has national priorities with regard to the waters of the Brahmaputra.

<sup>2</sup> Three main tributaries originating in Bhutan join the Yarlung Zangbo/Brahmaputra River in India (Negi, 1991).

For China, the river provides economic and energy opportunities, but compared with other transboundary watercourses in China, the Yarlung Zangbo is not much developed (Liu, 2015). Things are likely to change there, however, prompted by a growing demand for clean energy. For example, the Zangmu Hydroelectric Power Station, put into operation on 23 November 2015, became the first mega hydroelectric power station on the mainstream of the Yarlung Zangbo River (India Today, 2014). China's 12th Five-Year Plan of Energy Development approved three more dams on this river on 1 January 2013 (Government of the People's Republic of China, 2013). China is also working on an ambitious South-North water transfer project involving the Brahmaputra.

India's main domestic considerations are hydroelectricity, flood/ erosion/ sediment control, and integration of the isolated north-east of India into the rest of the country through local development by harnessing the potential of the Brahmaputra river. To increase food production and meet the needs of the population, India is interested in transferring major quantities of water from the Brahmaputra to drier, more populous areas of the country (Ray *et.al*, 2015). To that effect, the government had proposed the National River-Linking Project (NRLP), which would divert water from the Brahmaputra to the Ganges (Liu, 2015).

The river basin is also a major source of hydropower for India, since more than 40% (66,000 MW) of the total hydropower potential of the country is lying within the basin (Rahaman and Varis, 2009). However, as the middle riparian in the basin, India perceives these hydropower development projects as under threat from upper riparian China. India fears that China's hydropower and river diversion plans will reduce the flow of water downstream, which would potentially bring economic and environmental losses to India. The upper riparian is seen as unilateral in its action,

particularly related to hydropower development, and unforthcoming in terms of sharing of information (Ho, 2014).

For Bangladesh, the Brahmaputra is the lifeline to a large section of its population (Nayak and Panda, 2016). However, it is faced with multiple threats including riverbank erosion, sedimentation, annual floods, and diminished water flow and groundwater availability in the dry season. This means that Bangladesh's main domestic challenges encompass managing the physical impacts of the river (Nishat, 2000; Samaranayake, Limaye and Wuthnow, 2015). It also sees water infrastructure development plans from India and China as a threat to its water resource. As the most downstream country Bangladesh is a strong proponent of regional and international cooperation on water issues and frequently enters into -bilateral- agreements with other countries as well as international and regional organisations (Liu 2015).

The only example of cooperation in the Brahmaputra basin, considered to be a symbiotic, positive relation in water-related developments, has been the one between Bhutan and India (Biswas, 2011). By cooperating with India in the construction of hydropower projects since 1974, Bhutan has been able to create large amounts of government revenue from this economic resource (Liu, 2015). It also indicates that Bhutan embarked upon a very different path, compared to the other riparians, to develop its transboundary water bodies, by collaborating with its southern neighbour, India. The arrangement has also been beneficial to India because of its growing demand for energy (Biswas, 2011).

The understanding of benefit from the Brahmaputra river varies between the four sovereign states of the basin, likewise the incentives to cooperate. While each country realises the potential the river provides for economic development, the benefits are

seen through very localised and sectoral lenses. This triggers tension and disputes within as well as between the riparian countries.

Further, suspicion, distrust, and the absence of properly formulated negotiating frameworks have resulted in very little effective communication between the co-riparian countries. Discussions are going on among political leaders and other stakeholders for co-operation on water management of the Brahmaputra basin, yet very little progress has actually been made till date (Bandyopadhyay, 2002; Wirsing and Jasparro, 2007; Ray *et al.*, 2015). These discussions are also often conflated on account of larger territorial and political issues between China and India<sup>3</sup>.

Moreover, unlike in other international river basins, in the Brahmaputra basin, there is no institutional mechanism in place to address the issue of water management at river basin level (Bandyopadhyay, 2002). While so far there is no visible water conflict in the basin, in the absence of a regional level mechanism, significant international conflicts are possible there.

### **3.2 Regional initiatives over the Brahmaputra River**

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established in the 1980s provides a multilateral forum for discussion among the South Asian countries. However, the most heated ones, particularly water resource negotiations, were excluded from its brief at the start (Crow and Singh, 2009). Moreover, the SAARC does not include China, the most important upper riparian of the BRB. Besides, other *Track I* (government-to-government) initiatives like those between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) do not involve all the

<sup>3</sup> For example, India suspects that China claims the north-eastern State of Arunachal Pradesh to get access to its rich water resources (Ho, 2014).

Brahmaputra basin countries. This points to a lack of communication at Track 1 level over the River involving all its riparian countries.

A few modest steps to cooperate over the BRB have been taken by India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China at bilateral level such as (Liu, 2015):

- India-China: Data sharing, expert level mechanism, emergency response
- India-Bangladesh: Joint water committee, data sharing, navigation, ongoing process for Teesta agreement
- Bangladesh-China: Data sharing
- India- Bhutan: Cooperation through hydropower

These bilateral treaties address specific aspects (particularly flood management) of the broader issue of integrated water management (Barua, Vij, and Zulfiquir Rahman, 2017) that are also largely localised. They do not have a basin-wide approach. There are also no mechanisms to settle disputes and differences between two governments, thus making the overall scope of these bilateral cooperation shallow. The legal reach of an MoU is limited mostly to sharing of specific data only (Liu, 2015).

A few *Track II* and *Track III* cooperation initiatives have been taken, led by non-state actors. Their approach has been either bilateral or multilateral. They are:

- The Ecosystem for Life cooperation initiated by the International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
- The Brahmaputra Dialogue initiated by SaciWATERS
- The Abu Dhabi dialogue and the South Asia Water Initiative led by the World Bank

- A collaboration of scientists in International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) (with special reference to the Brahmaputra-Salween landscape)

Among the above-mentioned four initiatives, the one directly related to the Brahmaputra river basin is the '*Brahmaputra Dialogue*', which involves all the four basin countries. The rest of the initiatives does not cover the entire basin and the diplomacy is not limited to the BRB only. For example, the *Ecosystem for Life* includes India and Bangladesh (bilateral forum) and focuses on the whole Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna basin area (GBM basin). The *Abu Dhabi Dialogue* was between the seven countries that share the rivers of the Greater Himalayas, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. The *Salween-Brahmaputra Landscape* initiative was collaboration between India, China, and Myanmar to develop a framework for cooperation and common understanding on transboundary landscape issues.

This scenario of predominantly bilateral negotiations had been based mainly on domestic considerations of each riparian country in the basin. Yet, a few discursive processes had been initiated as a means of building multilateral, inter-state cooperation. The '*Brahmaputra Dialogue*' is the relevant case in point. It is an initiative in multitrack and multilateral diplomacy engaging all four Brahmaputra riparians to develop a framework for cooperation at basin level.

In the next section an analysis of the BD process is given. Then the observations are compared with similar processes in other river basins to provide informed conclusions about the achievements so far in the Brahmaputra basin.

#### **4. Multi track water diplomacy for the Brahmaputra River Basin**

##### **4.1 The Brahmaputra Dialogue**

In 2013 SaciWATERS initiated a multitrack interaction process in a project titled ‘Transboundary Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance in Brahmaputra River’, further known as the ‘Brahmaputra Dialogue’ (BD). This Dialogue provided a neutral platform for effective interaction between academicians, policy-makers, NGOs, media, CSOs, and other relevant stakeholders from the Brahmaputra basin countries. The idea was to arrive at a mutual understanding of what issues were at stake, how these might be framed, and how to identify the key questions around them. The approach was to start with a non-formal co-operative arrangement, which could develop into a more formal type over time, as confidence would be built, and as and when the political leadership would be ready (Samaranayake, Limaye, and Wuthnow, 2016).

#### 4.2 The framework for multitrack diplomacy in BRB

The dialogues under the BD project have been and are conducted in interactive workshops. These workshops are designed in such a way to give opportunities to participants to ask questions, seek clarifications, discuss assumptions, and examine arguments. This way, there is space and time to deal with contested knowledge claims as also to explore alternatives (Huntjens, Lebel, and Furze, 2015).

Along with multi-stakeholder dialogues, semi-structured interviews, closed-door interactions, and key informant meetings take place with key stakeholders to understand the nature and causes of conflict as well as cooperation options among the different stakeholders. Key informant meetings with stakeholders include both individual interviews and focused group discussions. The data are recorded through audio recorders or written notes, with the consent of participants. The interviews are interactive and are based on an unstructured questionnaire.

The dialogue workshops are conducted at two levels – country level and regional level. The *country-level workshop* is first conducted. It is meant to understand a particular concern at country level. Later, these concerns are discussed at *regional level* in the presence of representatives of the riparian countries. *Country-level workshops* are particularly important for India, because water is a state subject here. It has been recognised in India since long, that the river basin should be the unit of regional planning and development. This is also recognised in the National Water Policy of India, but states have substantive power over water resources. This has frequently led to interstate conflicts. The Brahmaputra enters India through the state of Arunachal Pradesh and flows through the state of Assam before entering Bangladesh. In both states there are large communities who depend upon the river for their social and economic needs. This has led to inter- state conflicts regarding the sharing of water. The cost of these conflicts and the cost of failing to focus on the entire river basin are rising rapidly, as water scarcity increases (e.g. Booker, 1995; Young, 1995; Gundimeda and Howe, 2008). The cost due to lack of coordinated planning will only grow, if states do not come together to develop a common goal and vision for the river, which can then be taken up at transboundary basin scale.

While in the other riparian countries of the Brahmaputra basin there are no such inter-state disputes, country-level workshops were organised to get the views of diverse groups of stakeholders. This gave an opportunity to those usually left out from formal decision-making processes.

The Brahmaputra Dialogue was implemented in three phases: The first phase in 2013-2014, the second in 2014-2015, and the third phase in 2015-2017.

**Figure 2: Flow chart depicting the three phases of Brahmaputra Dialogue**

[Insert here]

As shown in Fig. 2, *the first phase* (2013-2014) started with a bilateral approach involving only India and Bangladesh. The Track 3 mode was the entry point for the BD and so, the first phase mostly focused on people-to-people diplomacy between India and Bangladesh. While recognising the role that CSOs / NGOs and local communities can play in decision-making, it became clear in this phase to the parties involved that the capacity of CSOs to participate in policy formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation was a challenge. Due to this lack of capacity they were usually left out from formal decision-making in transboundary water management; this was particularly true for marginalised communities and women.

There was also a problem of governments accepting civil society as a strategic and knowledge partner and acknowledging it can act as a successful intermediary between the state and the people. With particular regard to the Brahmaputra basin there is a sense of distrust and misperception between the state and CSOs. Hence, building trust between the state and non-state actors and developing capacity to participate in transboundary dialogues was identified as the most important tasks. Accordingly, a workshop was designed to build the capacity of Track 3 stakeholders to participate in multi-stakeholder dialogues.

Country-level workshops were conducted in both India and Bangladesh, followed by a joint dialogue meeting. It was organised to bring Track 3 representatives from the two countries on a single platform for interaction and deliberation on issues of common interest. The workshops helped raise awareness on rights and legalities related to transboundary water management, improve communication and negotiation skills, and enhance their knowledge about the river through expert consultation.

The workshops conducted in the first phase of the dialogue are listed in Table 1:

**Table 1: List of workshops held between 2013-2014**

**[Insert here]**

*The second phase (2014-2015) of the dialogue moved from a bilateral to a multilateral approach with the involvement of China and Bhutan as well. In this phase, the dialogue moved from a Track 3 to a Track 2 mode. The structure of the workshops was intended to remain the same – country-level workshops followed by regional-level dialogues. But in this phase, country-level workshops were conducted only in India and Bangladesh, with plans to expand them to China and Bhutan in the next phase.*

In the second phase the informal nature of Track 2 diplomacy enabled a dialogue between state and non-state actors. It provided a space to scientists to disseminate findings of their research to both sides for a better understanding of this complex river system.

In the dialogue workshops it transpired that researchers, water practitioners, and managers, have made substantial analyses to understand the dynamics and potential of this mighty river. Yet, significant knowledge gaps remain with respect to the system and to sustainable approaches to the most productive use of the rich water resources, while simultaneously reigning in their destructive forces. Strengthening the evidence base and enhancing a shared understanding of the system would foster more strategic and cooperative planning across administrative and sectoral boundaries as well as multiple disciplines. In this context, the need for developing a reliable, comprehensive, and common knowledge base for the Brahmaputra basin was recognised by all workshop participants.

These dialogues at country and regional level also helped develop personal relationships between stakeholders due to the frank and open exchanges. The dialogue workshops, in most cases, followed a problem-solving approach where participants discussed various issues related to the management of the river. The issues identified were managing disasters like flood, drought, and erosion; navigation as an entry point for cooperation; and the downstream environmental impact of water infrastructure projects. Some stakeholders also felt that important opportunities for cross-learning from other basins facing similar challenges (floods, erosion, sedimentation) should be availed of through knowledge exchange and international study tours.

**Table 2: List of Workshops held between 2014-2015**

**[Insert here]**

In the *third phase* (2015-2017) the Brahmaputra Dialogue expanded its reach to Bhutan and China by organising country consultation meetings in both countries respectively, along with dialogue workshops in India and Bangladesh. Phase III became distinct from phase II particularly on account of the composition of participants, especially decision-makers, who participated both in country level and regional level meetings. (In China the dialogue is currently at Track 2 level). A broad range of officials, executives, and scholars involved in transboundary decision-making attended the meetings.

In this phase, a major challenge identified for the BRB was the lack of a nodal institution that could bring stakeholders together to develop joint strategies to manage the basin. Therefore, transboundary cases from other river basins were presented during various workshops to highlight and understand how (including the process) river basins across the world had arrived at a multilateral agreement. Other topics covered in the discussion were effective disaster management plans and the viable

economic opportunities available along the basin to sustain livelihood and to address poverty, and food and energy security in the area. The discussion also dealt with issues like limited political will and state sovereignty regarding transboundary river water management. It also brought out the importance of the creation of a level playing field and a sustainable institutional framework for dealing with these issues effectively.

The regional workshop in phase III was organised in Singapore, a country outside the region, to facilitate a neutral discussion with equal representation of diverse groups of stakeholders from each country. This phase ended with a symposium, the ‘Brahmaputra River Symposium’, which was held in India with representation from the four countries. It was the first of its kind for the Brahmaputra basin and brought together 150 delegates from across the world to understand and assess the knowledge landscape of the basin and its relationship with policy-making, to identify key knowledge gaps and ways to strengthen the science-policy interface.

It is important to mention here that during the second and third phases of the BD, several meetings – bilateral, closed-door, face-to-face interviews, etc. – had been conducted with government department officials and bureaucrats in India and Bangladesh. Such meetings were meant to inform them about the dialogue process and also to seek their participation in future dialogues.

**Table 3: List of Workshops held between 2015-2017**

**[Insert here]**

4. Discussion

4.1 Setting the need for multitrack diplomacy

The Brahmaputra river basin is under development pressure considering nearly 30% of India's water resources' potential and 41% of the country's total hydropower potential are found in this basin (Singh, 2004). The potential of the river to bring economic development has been the subject of at least a decade of discussion between governments of the region, but with very little productive outcome.

On the other hand, the river continues to bring disaster through annual flood and drought, increasing the livelihood uncertainty and impoverishment of the largest concentration of poor people living around the basin (Crow, 1999; Crow and Singh, 2009).

There is, nevertheless, a growing consensus that development of the region cannot be achieved without water resource development of the Brahmaputra river basin. There is a community of scholars, officials, and politicians in South Asia who believes that the region's rivers can be better harnessed for economic development through an integrated, basin-wide approach (Nishat and Faisal, 2000; Biswas 2011; Shrestha, Grabs, and Khadgi, 2015; Ray *et al.*, 2015 ).

There is also a growing recognition that such an approach needs to be combined with social, economic, political, cultural, and legal considerations along with scientific and technological paradigm (Baruah, 2012). However, unlike in other river basins shared by a number of countries, there is no institutional mechanism in place in the Brahmaputra basin to address the issue of water management at river basin level. Further, there is a lack of scientific knowledge and information about the river basin, since it is relatively under-researched compared to other river basins of South Asia (Ray *et al.*, 2015).

Notably, the lack of a regional framework or information about the river has not come as an obstruction to the planning of the construction of a series of water infrastructure

(storage) projects for this basin, particularly in India and China. But these plans, related to hydropower dams and river linking projects, are closely guarded, with very limited information in the public domain. There is also restricted access to and evaluation of the social and environmental impact of such plans. More so, the outcomes of such assessments are not shared with the affected communities, leading to a lack of trust among the basin communities across the BRB (Bandyopadhyay and Ghosh, 2009).

So far, not many large dam projects have been built in the Brahmaputra basin, but major projects like those in the tributaries of Brahmaputra (Dihang and Subansiri) are under construction in India. To be sure, such large storage projects raise questions of social and ecological sustainability, and the economic viability of the investments (Bandyopadhyay, 2002; Dore, 2014). Recently, differences of opinion have emerged in two groups within the region – proponents and opponents of water development projects.

The proponents, mostly water resource experts, believe that these water development infrastructures will enable the region to enjoy rapid economic development. The opponents see this as a reductionist view, since it does not consider the social and environmental impacts of such infrastructure projects (Bandyopadhyay and Ghosh, 2009). While, probably, the intentions of both groups are good, the problem is there is very little communication between them. In a wider context, there is no platform within or between countries where meaningful exchanges of opinion can take place. This has resulted in further miscommunication and suspicion, leading to public agitation and unrest (Baruah, 2012). As a result, the lack of dialogue, interaction, and engagement has resulted in tension and friction within as well as among the co-riparian nations of the BRB as also mistrust at political level.

Cooperative arrangements for transboundary waters are usually an outcome of long-drawn processes that include dialogues and negotiations between the riparian countries, mostly involving Track 1 diplomacy. However, the cooperation resulting from such formal diplomacy efforts is seen as a 'zero-sum' outcome. It is realised more and more that these dialogues and negotiations should happen at multiple levels and involving multiple stakeholders. For example, in the case of the Nile River basin, proponents argue that the Nile Basin Initiative's (NBI) emphasis on a formal, government-level, diplomacy approach to negotiation on the Nile waters is not solving the stalemate in that basin. They insist that multitrack diplomacy should be employed to build confidence among the basin states and their peoples (Hefny, 2011). For the Mekong, participatory governance and active engagement through multitrack diplomacy and dialogue, involving all relevant stakeholders, had become a prominent proposal for better management of the Mekong river basin (Keo, 2002; Hensengerth, 2009; Dore, 2014). As Dore (2014) notes, the regional Track 1 governance in the Mekong is struggling to equitably or effectively bring about far-reaching regional change, mainly because of the dominance of national interests (Hirsch and Jensen, 2006; Suhardiman, Giordano, and Molle, 2012). Therefore, to lift the quality of the Mekong basin development negotiations, there is a need for multitrack and multi-stakeholder platforms (Warner, 2007; Dore, 2014).

In the case of the Jordan river basin, Yumiko et al. (2017) highlighted the need for multitrack water diplomacy to promote a more effectively shared utilisation of the water among riparians of the lower part of the Jordan River. These authors argue that, while multitrack diplomacy is no substitute whatsoever for formal diplomacy, such diplomacy helps manage increasing degrees of variety and variability in transboundary water management. It also helps bring a plurality of views and

diversity of perceptions to the table of discussion. This, in turn, is hoped to bring more integrated and sustainable outcomes. As Warner (2005) puts it ‘once people see the sense of involving multiple voices, it is felt, they will be broadly accepted as the way forward in dealing with the increasing complexity, diversity and dynamics of water management’.

Traditional water diplomacy (government to government) has fallen short in South Asia too. There have been cases (e.g., the Mahakali Treaty between India and Nepal), where in spite of long negotiations the treaty became paralysed and undermined due to narrow political interests (Gyawali and Dixit, 1999). Likewise, the Indus Commission, established under the 1960 Indus Treaty, and the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission, established in 1972, were a result of Track 1 diplomacy. Yet, they are considered the least cooperative institutions for transboundary water management (Kliot, Shmueli, and Shamir, 2001).

To promote water development projects for transboundary rivers there has to be support, not only from all the countries affected by a project but also from the communities within each basin country. With the increasing complexity of contemporary issues, and time and resource constraints faced by governments a broad range of unofficial contacts and interactions is required to manage and resolve conflicts of transboundary scale (Nishat and Faisal, 2000). Multi-track diplomacy may not necessarily solve problems, but they do help disputing parties understand other stakeholders' views and interests, at least partly (Warner 2007), thereby helping arrive at a common understanding of ‘cooperation’.

Considering past experiences from different river basins multitrack diplomacy for the Brahmaputra basin too is felt necessary in the larger interest of the region. This

diplomacy for the BRB will create and support spaces where meaningful conversation can take place among diverse stakeholder groups, which is lacking at the moment. It can also inform and help shape a Track 1 negotiation and decision-making process by bringing in a wider range of perspectives on needs, impacts, and options, and having them deliberated openly (Huntjens, Lebel, and Furze, 2015).

Trust is seen as the cornerstone for cooperation, but it is not something that can be easily developed or managed (Huntjens and de Man, 2017). To develop trust and confidence between the riparian countries of the Brahmaputra there has to be long-term interaction and communication between different actors. These should include non-traditional stakeholders -such as the business sector, media, and funding institutions- and marginalised groups, women in particular. The Brahmaputra Dialogue is a modest step toward this goal.

#### 4.2 Outcome of the Brahmaputra Dialogue Process

Dialogue in transboundary context needs a conscious effort across many years. As evident from the cases of the Nile, Mekong, Jordan, Indus and Ganges rivers, single-track diplomacy often fails to provide space for diversity of perceptions and plurality of views. Lack of public involvement and secrecy around negotiations often heighten scepticism (Islam and Susskind, 2013) and could upset development plans of the region. To avoid such scepticism a need for multitrack diplomacy was felt for the BRB. The BD process not only provided a platform for civil society and media to engage more productively, but also helped government representatives take the edge off misconceptions of grassroots organisations and reduce the circulation of misinformation on the basin. (This happened particularly so in the country-level workshops in India related to hydropower dams and the regional-level dialogue held in Singapore.)

In short, the BD platform bringing together multiple stakeholders with very different perspectives provided a space to discuss issues, challenges, and opportunities related to the BRB. At the same time it is important to note that, although for each stakeholder cooperation could have a different meaning, the drivers of cooperation need not necessarily be mutually exclusive. In fact, they complement each other. For that reason already multitrack diplomacy would be handy.

For a dialogue project it is extremely difficult to quantify the achievements. Nevertheless, some outputs of the BD in the last four years may be outlined:

- The dialogues have been able to create a platform / space for multi-stakeholders across the four riparian countries to meet and talk once every year (from 2013 onward). In spite of arguments, contestations, confrontations, and debates between participants, the dialogue process has helped understand how each country approaches transboundary water management and cooperation.
- The dialogues have been able to generate a willingness at multiple levels to continue the dialogue by recognising the merit and credibility of such a neutral platform, particularly with respect to a trust-deficit area like the BRB.
- The willingness shown by the dialogue participants have also helped attract donors' interest in funding the process (the BD is funded under the SAWI program)<sup>4</sup> and helped realise such sustained dialogue processes are important steps toward building trust and confidence among multiple stakeholders.
- The workshops have been able to improve the quality of dialogue by building capacity at different levels (particularly during the interaction between Track 2 and Track 3 participants) and have also enabled participants to identify joint

<sup>4</sup> The South Asian Water Initiative funded by the World Bank has been supporting this project since 2014 and has committed to support the project till 2019. Before the World Bank, between 2012 – 2014, The Asia Foundation supported the project.

research themes<sup>5</sup> for robust evidence, including socio-economic and policy research.

- The four years of Brahmaputra Dialogue workshops have opened up arenas of discussion, which were usually closed to key stakeholders and they also helped give attention to arenas that were open but had been considered irrelevant to decision-making till then.

The BD is not devoid of challenges. One major challenge is generating political willingness to cooperate, because political commitment is crucial for any transboundary cooperation. But as politics take the centre stage, the transboundary dialogue becomes complex and extremely challenging.

Further, there is always the risk of a change in political leadership, and the efforts made in generating willingness at the political level (Track 1) may not lead to fruition after all. While Tracks 2 and 3 diplomacy play a crucial role in influencing political decision-making, they function within limitations and are not party to the final decisions. Consequently, the Track 1.5 engagement enables an understanding of the political dynamics of each riparian country, so that an informed move may be made towards engaging Track 1 - in due course of time.

Trust is the cornerstone of transboundary cooperation, but trust cannot be built overnight, it needs long-term interaction between parties. The Brahmaputra Dialogue may be seen as the first step towards building such trust, since it has provided a safe place where openness and cooperation are stimulated and reinforced (Huntjens, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> The IIT Guwahati, India, the Yunan University, China, and Institute of Modelling, Bangladesh are working together since 2016 in a research project titled 'Water resources vulnerability and security assessment of Yarlung Tsangpo - Brahmaputra transboundary river basin'. The project is funded by the National Natural Science Foundation of China and is one of the major outcomes of the dialogue. The IIT Guwahati and Yunan University also signed an MoU in September 2017 for academic collaboration and exchange.

But there is a major challenge: the availability of financial resources to sustain such a process. Since the outcome of such dialogue projects cannot be measured quantitatively, donors are often hesitant to finance processes without clear outcomes and timelines. In this context, programmes like SAWI have proved useful, where one of its objectives is to create trust and confidence in regional or basin water management through dialogue processes.

## 5. Conclusion

The article discussed the need for multitrack diplomacy, because it can act as an essential tool for inclusive governance in the BRB. While there are signs of cooperation in the basin, the current mode of collaboration is mostly issue-based and revolves around sharing hydrological data.

In addition, there is a unilateral approach, particularly by India and China, in managing the BRB. There is a need for multilateral approaches that are transboundary and have an integrated focus. Such multilateral engagement may not lead to multilateral cooperation, but it may be expected to enhance the scope of the existing cooperation by moving beyond the sharing of data to the joint management of disasters like floods.

The mistrust, suspicion, and lack of communication between riparian countries and riparian communities make Track 1 diplomacy complicated in the BRB. The Brahmaputra Dialogue is probably the first, sustained, multitrack and multilateral effort, especially developed to build trust and confidence within and between the countries sharing the basin.

There is no doubt that development of the water resources of the BRB will play an important role in poverty alleviation and raising the living standards of the basin

communities. In the present situation, a major challenge is that BRB countries are vastly different in terms of socio-economic development and environmental status. This diversity gives rise to differences in overall perspective, incentives to cooperate, and the choice of negotiating strategies. All this is making cooperation difficult.

The multitrack diplomacy approach for the BRB, as in the Brahmaputra Dialogue, offers an innovative way to overcome such obstacles.

### **Disclosure statement**

We declare no conflicts of interest for this article.

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**Figure 1**



Track 3 (CSOs, Academicians, and NGOs); Bilateral: India and Bangladesh						
Sr. No.	Workshop	Location	Month /Year	Phase	Remarks	
1	Level Meeting	Bangladesh	August 2013	Phase 1	Attended by 25 Bangladeshi participants from non-government sectors.	2013-2014
2	Country Level Meeting	India	September 2013	Bilateral dialogues	Attended by 30 Indian participants representing all the seven North Eastern States of India	
3	India and Bangladesh meeting	Bangladesh	March 2014	Phase 2	Attended by representatives from India and Bangladesh for mutual interaction and deliberation on issues of common interest	2014-2015
	Workshop	India	January 2015	Phase 3	Began as Bilateral dialogues and moved to multi lateral dialogue	
Track 3 (CSOs, Academicians, and NGOs); Track 2 (Ex Bureaucrats, Academicians, and NGOs); Track 1.5 (Serving Bureaucrats); Moving towards multilateral dialogue ( India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and China)						
Sr. No.	Workshop	Location	Month /Year	Phase	Remarks	
1	Level Meeting	India	January 2015	Phase 3	Attended by 35 participants from	2015-2017
	Workshop			Multilateral dialogue		

2	Bilateral meetings with government officials in the state of Assam	India	March 2015	government and non-government sectors Meetings were conducted with the following departments – Flood and River Erosion Management Authority (FREMA), Brahmaputra board, Department of Water Resources and Department of environment and forest.
3	Bilateral meeting with government officials in the state of Arunachal Pradesh	India	April 2015	Meetings were conducted with the following departments – Department of Water Resources, Department of Forest and Environment and the Chief Minister’s office,
4	Multilateral dialogue meeting	Bangladesh	May 2015	The dialogue moved from bilateral to multilateral level with the inclusion of representatives (track 2 level) from Bhutan and China
5	Dissemination meeting	India	August 2015	Attended by government and non government representatives from all the four countries, this meeting discussed what was achieved in the last two years and also a way forward for better continuity of the dialogue
Multi track (including track1.5) ; Multilateral dialogue (India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and China)				
<b>Sr. No.</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Month /Year</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
1	Advisory committee meeting	India	February 2016	A committee with representative (mostly academicians) was formed to discuss the structure of the dialogues and the role of the partner institutions to taking forward the dialogue in

				their own country.
2	Country Level Meeting	Bangladesh	June 2016	Attended by Govt and non Govt. representatives including Senior Secretary, Ministry of Water Resources, Bangladesh
3	Bilateral meeting with government officials in Dhaka	Bangladesh	June 2016	Meetings were conducted with officials from MoWR, Joint River Commission (JRC), WARPO, Bangladesh Water Board
4	Multilateral consultation meeting with academicians	China	July 2016	Meeting was held in Yunnan University to identify joint research themes and for future dialogues.
5	Country Level Meeting	India	August 2016	Attended by secretary MoWR, India, to discuss about ways for cooperation among the states within India
6	Consultation meeting	Bhutan	September 2016	Attended by govt. officials of various departments like National Environment Commission, Ministry of Agriculture and Forest, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs
7	Closed door meeting held during International River Symposium between govt. representatives of Bhutan, Bangladesh and India	India	September 2016	Under Chatham house rule
8	Regional level dialogue meeting	Singapore	October 2016	Attended by Govt. and non Govt. representatives of four countries including the Senior Secretary, MoWR, Bangladesh.
9	Country Level workshop on Brahmaputra Knowledge Exchange Programme	India	November 2016	Attended by CSOs, academic community and state officials to bridge knowledge gap on science, policies and common perceptions about the Brahmaputra

				River.
10	Country level workshop	Bhutan	March 2017	National deliberation between state bureaucrats and CSO's on transboundary river governance of Brahmaputra River
11	Country level workshop	Bangladesh	April 2017	Multi-stakeholder Dialogue on Disaster Management for the Brahmaputra Basin
12	Country level workshop	India	June 2017	Developing skill and training workshop-training workshop on transboundary Brahmaputra River
13	Regional symposium "Brahmaputra River Symposium : knowledge beyond boundaries"	India	September 2017	Strengthening the interface between science and policy for improved decision making, Attended by 150 delegates including policy makers from within and outside the region

#### Highlights

- The article provides an outline of the current issues in the Brahmaputra River Basin and illustrate the need for multi track and multi stakeholder dialogues in the Brahmaputra region.
- The paper is inspired by the "Brahmaputra dialogue" project initiated in 2013 by SaciWATERs (a non- governmental organization based in India), involving the four riparian countries of the BRB.
- The multi-track diplomacy framework used by the Brahmaputra case demonstrates that water diplomacy has to be an inclusive, open and transparent process involving multiple actors because such interaction facilitates sustainable water cooperation, not only between riparian countries but also between riparian communities.