

Beyond Borders: Navigating Asia's Water Challenges

Solving Asia's water stress will require a concerted diplomatic effort on the international stage.

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Once an abstract concern, water stress in Asia is now an undeniable reality exacerbated by rapid population growth, urbanization, and climate change. The region is largely failing to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on water, with almost 500 million people still lacking access to at least basic water supply services and more than 1.1 billion without adequate sanitation.

The transboundary nature of many of the region's watercourses adds an additional layer of complexity and conflict potential. This crisis ripples through South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia, transcending borders and demanding a united response. This challenge, with its far-reaching implications, reiterates the critical role of water diplomacy, transformative measures, and cooperation.

In this landscape, the approaching World Water Week in Stockholm, Sweden, serves not only as a pivotal juncture but also as a reminder of the ongoing commitment required to address these pressing issues.

Water Insecurity and Regional Dynamics

South Asia is home to over 1.9 billion people, but only accounts for 4 percent of the world's annual renewable water. This glaring disparity creates a wide chasm between the demand and supply of water resources.

A further complicating factor is that the region is home to some of the world's most prominent transboundary rivers, which flow across the borders of nations that have a history of political mistrust and animosity.

The Yarlung-Tsangpo/Brahmaputra River, for example, is shared between China, India, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. The two main co-riparians, India and China, have maintained strained political relations over their disputed border, and concerns over a potential water conflict persist as upstream China has no formal water-sharing agreements with its downstream neighbors.

China's most recent plans to build a "super dam" at the Great Bend of the Yarlung-Tsangpo/Brahmaputra River sent alarm bells ringing across India over fears of impacts on downstream water security. Recent satellite images already show Chinese dam construction activity only a few kilometers north of the tri-junction of China's border with India and Nepal.

Another neighboring pair, Pakistan and India, often disagree on equitable river sharing and infrastructure development on river tributaries. These tensions exist despite a history of water sharing under the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 – showcasing how water agreements have the potential to facilitate cooperation, yet remain fragile.

In Southeast Asia, apparent water abundance hides underlying vulnerabilities, especially for local populations that have not all equally benefited from high economic growth rates.

This region, historically less prone to water disputes, now faces a complex predicament. Climate change has introduced unprecedented variability in precipitation patterns, straining water resource management. Dam construction, ostensibly for energy and development, has disrupted river ecosystems, affected fisheries, and changed sediment flow with broader implications for economic and food security in the near future.

While the Mekong River Commission (MRC) has prevented full-scale conflicts, other river basins like the Irrawaddy face uncertain futures without effective institutional mechanisms and negotiation platforms.

For Central Asia, water scarcity is intertwined with complex geopolitics. In an agrarian region dominated by arid landscapes and shared rivers, the competition for water resources has historically fueled tensions among the five regional players: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Add Afghanistan's entry into the fray with the Qosh Tepa irrigation canal, and the stage is set for conflicts over the vital Amu Darya.

The need for strengthening cooperative and inclusive frameworks in Central Asia is thus more critical than ever. Existing mechanisms like the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) have so far not been able to prove their effectiveness in terms of responding to challenges in a timely fashion, and do not include Afghanistan as an increasingly important upstream player.

Potential Conflict and The Need for Cooperation

As waters recede, conflicts can surge, especially if institutions are ill-prepared or absent altogether. Potential economic losses, strains on regional relations, humanitarian challenges, and destabilization of already fragile areas underscore the far-reaching ramifications of such disputes. Water crises can force mass migrations, exacerbate food and energy insecurity, and increase already persistent gender inequalities in the region.

The way forward hinges on regional institutions, global cooperation, and effective hydro-diplomacy. Regional platforms, fortified by the engagement of international organizations, civil society actors, and expert communities, should provide the basis for constructive and collaborative dialogues on water-related challenges. River Basin Organizations (RBOs) are particularly significant in fostering cooperation among stakeholders over shared waters, building trust, and ensuring fair and equitable water use that sustains ecosystems.

The cornerstone, however, is political commitment at all levels to propel action and foresight-driven policymaking.

On a multilateral level, the United Nations and other global actors must further amplify their role in facilitating cooperation. The recent U.N. Water Conference was a significant step in the right direction. It marked the establishment of a new U.N. water envoy dedicated to water security and generated over 700 non-binding commitments. Many were related to transboundary basin cooperation – a testament to the collective drive to accelerate the Water Action Agenda,

However, it's important to acknowledge the conference's limitations. Many commitments lack specific targets or comprehensive cross-border action plans necessary for success. Notably, Asia's representation at the conference was inadequate, with the exception of the MRC's participation.

This absence not only hinders the region's progress toward water security and sustainable development, it limits the efficacy of such international efforts in coordinating a global agenda. Addressing this underrepresentation in the future and ensuring meaningful participation from Asian nations, whether at Stockholm this year or other such large-scale platforms, is crucial for fostering effective global cooperation, tapping into diverse experiences, and achieving shared water goals.

The Path Forward

The road to resolving Asia's water crisis is arduous, but it's one that must be traversed with unwavering determination. The region's nations must rise above historical grievances and prioritize shared interests. Only through collective endeavors guided by cooperative water diplomacy can Asia work toward a future where water insecurity becomes a manageable challenge rather than an insurmountable obstacle.

The forthcoming World Water Week offers a global stage where diplomatic bridges can be built, partnerships strengthened, and the foundations laid for a water-secure future for Asia and beyond.

Discussion Qns:

- 1. What are the differing perspectives between upper and lower riparian states along the rivers in Asia?*
- 2. How can the riparian states mitigate potential conflict while prioritizing their own needs?*