Treaties can be a non-starter: a multi-track and multilateral dialogue approach for Brahmaputra Basin

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Abstract

Countries sharing the Brahmaputra River have for decades deliberated on formulating and implementing cooperative strategies to develop the potential of the basin. Yet, little progress has been made so far at the government-to-government track 1 level in achieving regional cooperation due to the diverse national interests of the riparian countries. This has led to tension and friction among co-riparian nations and mistrust at political level. Drawing from the Brahmaputra Dialogue, this paper aims to highlight the merit of multi-track and multilateral dialogue processes for building trust and confidence between the riparian countries – paving a way towards transboundary cooperation. The paper concludes that given the geo-politics and the national interests of each riparian nation, negotiation for a treaty for cooperation through track 1 diplomacy, in the Brahmaputra River Basin (BRB), is a non-starter. Multi-track and multilateral dialogues can provide a platform to pursue positive interactions and can be viewed as an extension to existing state-diplomacy in BRB, to bring about sustainable change in the basin management.

Keywords: Brahmaputra River Basin; Dialogue process; Multilateral; Multi-track; South Asia; Transboundary

Introduction

Originating in the Tibet autonomous region of China and flowing through four countries before reaching the sea at the Bay of Bengal, the Yarlong–Tsangpo–Brahmaputra–Yamuna River Basin (henceforth Brahmaputra River Basin) is one of the largest rivers in South Asia. The river, in China, initially flows east before changing direction, breaking through a deep (4876.8 m) gorge, and then turning abruptly south-west to flow through north-eastern India and then Bangladesh (Uprety \\& Salman, 2011). Shared by these four countries the basin is rich in biodiversity, has a huge potential for irrigation development, livelihood opportunities, and infrastructure related operations such as navigation and hydropower (Bandyopadhyay, 2002; Biswas, 2011; Ray \textit{et al}., 2015; Barua \textit{et al}., 2018).


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The potential in the Brahmaputra River Basin (BRB) for reducing poverty is immense. Brahmaputra, therefore, has been the subject of discussion between the governments of the region, as water is one of the resources this region has to promote long-term economic development (Biswas, 2011). The countries have been discussing ways to formulate and implement cooperative strategies that can help to improve the economic condition and living standards of the basin community. Although various options are available for cooperation and collaborative efforts in the BRB, the discussions on regional cooperation among the political leaders have not yielded many results so far. This is because of the diverse national interests of the riparian countries and the tendency of countries like India and China, in particular, to link water to national security concerns (Rahaman & Varis, 2009). This has resulted in taking water out of the domain of technical management and thus leading to low-level cooperation in every aspect including data and information sharing (Ojha & Singh, 2005; Biswas, 2011). There have been collaborations, mainly on a bilateral and project basis (Bandyopadhyay, 2002) but to date no multilateral or basin-wide international/regional treaty has been concluded on the Brahmaputra. Further, there is also a lack of scientific knowledge related to the hydrology and socio-economic aspect of the river as BRB is relatively under-researched compared to other river basins of South Asia.

However, the lack of information about the river has not obstructed the plans for construction of a series of water infrastructure (storage projects) on the BRB, particularly in India and China. But these plans, such as hydropower dams, river-linking projects etc., are closely guarded, with very limited information in the public domain. This has resulted in mistrust and suspicion between the riparian countries across the BRB as well as having interestingly led to two groups within the basin. One group within the water development projects believes that the benefits foregone by each of these countries not using water as an engine for economic and regional development have been very substantial (Verghese, 1990, 2007), particularly considering the extensive and abject poverty that exists in all the four basin countries (Biswas, 2011). But others who contest this view argue that current dominant modes of development (especially development of hydropower and river linking projects), are risky, unsustainable and inequitable and they are unjust socially, ecologically and economically (Dore, 2014).

Both the groups may be well intentioned but the challenge is that there is very little effective communication between them and there is no platform within or between countries where meaningful exchange of opinion can take place. The lack of dialogue, interaction and engagement has resulted in tension and friction among co-riparian nations and mistrust at political level. The traditional water diplomacy (government-to-government interaction or track 1) in such a situation falls short in bringing transparency and cooperation. This is because in South Asia, there have been cases (e.g. the Mahakali treaty between India and Nepal) where in spite of long negotiations the treaty was paralysed and undermined due to narrow political interests (Gyawali & Dixit, 1999). Hence, to promote the larger interest of the region, there is a need for multi-track and multilateral informal interaction between the riparian countries of Brahmaputra. Such multi-track diplomacy for the Brahmaputra Basin will create and support spaces where meaningful conversation can take place among diverse stakeholder groups. While trust is seen as the cornerstone for cooperation, it is not something that can be easily developed or managed (Huntjens & Man de, 2017). In order to develop trust and confidence between the riparian

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1 Track 1 diplomacy is official diplomacy, where dialogue takes place between officials, which mostly include politicians and high-ranking military personnel in a nation-state centred perspective. This is the traditional form of diplomacy.
countries of Brahmaputra, there has to be long-term interaction and communication between different actors, which should also include non-traditional stakeholders, such as the private sector, media, funding institutions and marginalized groups, including women. Such interaction can eventually inform and help shape more formal negotiations and decision making (Huntjens et al., 2015).

In the recent past, there have been a few track 22 cooperation initiatives led by non-state actors for the Brahmaputra Basin – Ecosystem for Life (International Union for Conservation of Nature), The Abu Dhabi dialogue initiative led by the World Bank, Brahmaputra-Salween landscape through the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development – which are either bilateral in their approach or do not focus entirely on bringing water cooperation for the Brahmaputra Basin. ‘The Brahmaputra Dialogue’ initiative is, to date, the only multi-track and multilateral initiative which involves all the four basin countries and deals with the BRB. Therefore, this paper, drawing from the ‘Brahmaputra Dialogue’ describes the dialogue process and brings out the narratives from the dialogue to highlight that such deliberative or discursive processes are means of building cooperation between the Brahmaputra riparian countries. The paper argues that while current water cooperation in this basin is limited and each riparian has its own domestic considerations, multi-track dialogues can act as innovative ways to pursue positive interactions in the Brahmaputra Basin even at multilateral levels, which can eventually pave the way for multilateral cooperation.

The remaining paper is divided into three sections. The first section of the article provides an outline of the current issues involving the BRB. The second section illustrates the ongoing multi-track dialogue in the Brahmaputra Basin and the relevance of such dialogue in the BRB. Lastly, the paper concludes with a discussion on the important lessons that can be learned through the partial success that the dialogue has achieved thus far.

Context

The Brahmaputra Basin

The Brahmaputra River Basin (Figure 1), which supports more than 100 million people, is a vital resource base for poverty alleviation and economic advancement (Bandyopadhyay, 2002). But, the development potential of the basin has been hindered by significant natural and anthropogenic challenges (Ray et al., 2015). The basin has been described as ‘plagued by floods and droughts’ and land-reshaping sedimentation in the rivers and floodplains (Babel & Wahid, 2011) brings uncertainty and impoverishment to the lives of the basin communities.

Nevertheless, currently, there is a growing consensus that the perils of the rivers can be turned into prosperity (Crow & Singh, 2009). This has led to a keen interest among riparian countries to develop the under-developed hydropower resources and flood prevention infrastructure (Rahaman & Varis, 2009). The national governments of the riparian countries see such water infrastructure as tangible (although partial) solutions to the most fundamental problems of poverty and natural disasters (particularly floods). This in turn has also resulted in diverse national priority for each of the countries to harness

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2 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.
the potential of the river. For example, Brahmaputra provides economic and energy opportunities to China, and therefore hydropower generation and river linking projects are China’s priority. For India, Brahmaputra River provides an opportunity to integrate isolated North-East India through local development by developing water infrastructure on the river, which will control flood and erosion and at the same time will generate hydropower. For Bangladesh, Brahmaputra is the lifeline to a large section of its population, but is faced with multiple threats including riverbank erosion, sedimentation, annual floods, and diminished water flow and groundwater availability in the dry season. Thus, Bangladesh’s main domestic challenges encompass managing the physical impacts of the river (Nishat & Faisal, 2000; Malhotra, 2010; Mahapatra & Ratha, 2015).

**Current issues**

These diverse national interests over the Brahmaputra River have triggered tension and disputes between the riparian countries of the basin. For China, Brahmaputra provides economic and energy opportunity and China is seen as unilateral in its action, particularly related to hydropower development, and unforthcoming in terms of sharing of information (Ho, 2014). For India along with hydroelectricity, flood/erosion/sediment control is the main domestic consideration but as the middle riparian in the basin, India faces threats from upper riparian China. India is concerned that China’s hydropower and
River diversion plans will reduce the flow of water downstream, which will bring enormous economic and environmental loss to India. For Bangladesh, Brahmaputra is the lifeline to a large section of its population (Nayak & Panda, 2016), but the country is faced with multiple threats including riverbank erosion, sedimentation, annual floods, and diminished water flow and groundwater availability in the dry season. Thus, Bangladesh’s main domestic challenges encompass managing the physical impacts of the river (Nishat & Faisal, 2000; Malhotra, 2010; Samaranayake et al., 2016) and Bangladesh also sees water infrastructure development plans by India and China as a threat to its water resources. While India, China and Bangladesh are struggling to come to a common consensus in harnessing the potential of the river, India and Bhutan’s cooperation on construction of hydropower projects is the only example of cooperation in the Brahmaputra Basin. The arrangement has also been beneficial to India due to its growing demand for energy and is considered to be a symbiotic positive relation in water-related developments (Biswas, 2011). The treaty of friendship signed in 1949 between India and Bhutan and revised in February 2007 is said to be central to the two countries’ relations. The cooperation between India and Bhutan is interest-driven and the trust and understanding have matured over the years (Bisht, 2010). Such an approach has helped in strengthening the relationship between the two countries through cooperation and dialogue.

Recognizing the potential of the Brahmaputra Basin, a growing community of scholars and policymakers have suggested that the river can be better harnessed through an integrated basin-wide approach (Nishat & Faisal, 2000; Biswas, 2011; Ray et al., 2015; Shrestha et al., 2015). However, unlike in other river basins shared by a number of countries, such as the Nile, Mekong, and Rhine, in the Brahmaputra Basin there is no institutional mechanism in place to address the issue of water management at the river basin level. Development of water infrastructure like hydropower dams, river linking projects etc., on a river basin where there is a lack of information and scientific knowledge, creates suspicion and mistrust among stakeholders, particularly related to the feasibility and viability of such interventions. In addition, information related to these development plans, initiated by the national government of the riparian countries (particularly India and China) is closely guarded, with very limited information in the public domain for riparian countries to know about these development plans. There is also restricted access to and evaluation of social and environmental impact assessments of such plans, and the outcomes of such assessments are not shared with the affected communities. This has resulted in mistrust and suspicion, and differences of interests between the riparian countries as well as among the communities of BRB. The basin communities, the civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other grass root organizations believe that these development projects are a result of specific interests, and as such have raised questions of social justifiability and ecological sustainability of such investments (Bandyopadhyay, 2002; Dore, 2014).

The Brahmaputra Basin is at present, therefore, at an important juncture of the basin management due to the diverse interests and opinions on how the basin should be utilized in the future. There are also significant challenges resulting from historical differences between countries of the region, high political mistrust and suspicion, increasing nationalism, closed-door negotiations exclusively on water issues, absence of negotiation frameworks and lack of open communication between the countries, as well as within the country (Biswas, 2011; Barua et al., 2018). Negotiation for a treaty, based on current dynamics within BRB, might not be the right choice, as such cooperation could lead to asymmetric arrangements benefiting the hegemon that may become a source of conflict in future. Building an enabling environment – and in particular knowledge, trust, and confidence among co-riparian countries – is usually the first step in building cooperative transboundary institutions (Jägerskog & Zeitoun, 2009).
In order to facilitate cooperation among the Brahmaputra riparian countries, diplomacy at multiple levels is required but this is not yet well developed. There are no focused or discursive processes yet, as a means of building cooperation, between the Brahmaputra riparian countries. Cooperation is possible if problems and opportunities are jointly discussed and identified, knowledge and information are shared across the basin, and a dialogue platform is available where multiple stakeholders can participate and share their views. Such meaningful interactions and communication between the riparian countries and riparian communities in the BRB can help to ease the tensions, and build trust and confidence for effective cooperation. Based on this understanding the ‘Brahmaputra Dialogue’ (BD) project was initiated in 2013, to pursue positive interactions at multiple levels in the Brahmaputra Basin at the bilateral and even at multilateral3 levels. This paper aims to show how an informal multi-track dialogue process can create a neutral platform for the riparian countries to meet regularly, strengthen relationships, build trust and inform the official process (track 1) for the co-management of the BRB.

Methodology

Data collection

This paper uses a qualitative design inquiry for data collection and analysis. The data for this paper are a collection of reports and transcribed discussions of various workshops under the ‘Brahmaputra Dialogue’ initiative. The dialogue uses a multi-track and multilateral dialogue structure across Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and India. The workshops were conducted at two levels – country level and regional level. The country level workshops were first conducted to understand the concern and interests at the country level and later these were discussed at the multilateral regional level workshops in the presence of representatives of the riparian countries. Figure 2 below describes the process the dialogue workshop followed.

The first phase of BD (2013–2014) started as a bilateral initiative focusing on India and Bangladesh. Workshops were conducted both at country level and regional level (see Table 1). The stakeholders involved in the first phase of the dialogue workshops, both in India and Bangladesh, were mainly CSOs, scholars and academicians. The regional level workshop, which took place in Dhaka, along with CSOs also had a few retired bureaucrats (RB) and influential academicians from both countries, thus making it a track 2, multi-stakeholder, bilateral regional level workshop.

The second phase (2014–2015) of the BD project continued to focus on India and Bangladesh but there was a demand from the dialogue stakeholders to include China and Bhutan in the dialogue process. The country level workshops in the second phase had the same participation as Phase I but included an expanded group with more people joining the workshop. The regional level workshop, however, moved from a bilateral to a multilateral dialogue workshop, with participation from China and Bhutan. Along with CSOs, NGOs and academicians, in the second phase, there was also a representation from serving bureaucrats (SB) from India and Bangladesh, thus taking the dialogue from track 2 level to track 1.54 level (see Table 2). Although, the second phase was not designed as a multilateral dialogue and neither

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3 Multilateral is multiple countries working in concert on a given issue.
4 Diplomatic initiatives that are facilitated by unofficial bodies, but directly involve officials from the conflict in question (Nan, 2005, p. 165).
was track 1.5 level interaction planned, the continuous dialogue process served to create a momentum across multiple stakeholders within the respective countries (particularly India and Bangladesh), thereby encouraging a willingness to participate by multiple stakeholders in both the countries.

Table 1. List of workshops conducted in Phase I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. no.</th>
<th>Workshop</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Month /Year</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 2013 – 14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track 2 (CSOs, Academicians, and NGOs); Bilateral: India and Bangladesh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Country Level Meeting</td>
<td>Dhaka, Bangladesh</td>
<td>August 2013</td>
<td>Attended by 25 Bangladeshi participants from non-government sectors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Country Level Meeting</td>
<td>Guwahati, India</td>
<td>September 2013</td>
<td>Attended by 30 Indian participants representing all of the seven North-Eastern States of India.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>India-Bangladesh Joint Dialogue meeting</td>
<td>Dhaka, Bangladesh</td>
<td>March 2014</td>
<td>Attended by representatives from India and Bangladesh for mutual interaction and deliberation on issues of common interest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The two phases of the dialogue workshop could generate a demand to continue the dialogue. The third phase (2015–2017) of the BD was therefore conceptualized based on the recommendation that came from the dialogue workshops of the last two years. The third phase, which started in 2016, is an ongoing multilateral process, which has involved China and Bhutan from the beginning of the project. The country level workshops are planned for all of the four riparian countries, which will be followed by multilateral regional level workshops.

Analysis of the dialogue workshops

This paper brings in the findings from Phase I (2013–2014) and Phase II (2014–2015) dialogue workshops, as Phase III (2015–2017) is ongoing. The analysis of the workshops is based on the discussion of six country level and two regional level dialogue workshops in the riparian countries. These workshops lasted between one and two days (each day ~ 6 hours of discussion). As mentioned above, the workshop participants included stakeholders ranging from SB, RB expert academician (EA), key civil society actors (CS), NGOs implementing projects on-the-ground (NG), and representatives of donor agencies. Although we are sure to not have covered all the relevant actors in the transboundary domain in the four riparian countries, we believe that the selection of actors has been successful in gathering the relevant interpretation and notions around Brahmaputra Basin.
The data from the workshop reports were analysed to explain how the conversation has evolved, the kind of issues that are raised during the dialogues and what the stakeholders feel about the dialogue initiative. These key questions helped to analyse the nuanced understanding of challenges linked to multi-track diplomacy and how we can learn and enrich the dialogue process. We analysed how some stakeholders were uncomfortable sitting with their counterparts during the initial period of the dialogue, but that changed over the next round of dialogue workshops. The quality of participation and facilitation also improved over time, which led to meaningful conversation among the stakeholders. It helped us in bringing the sensitive issues to the table and in observing how riparians respond. We analysed the discussion on the sensitive issues and realized that these discussions are useful to support track 1 diplomacy between the countries.

Results

This section presents the key messages that came from the country and regional level dialogues conducted in the last three years (2013–2015) in the riparian countries of the Brahmaputra Basin. The section reflects on ‘how’ the dialogue has evolved in the last three years, and what are the partial successes the dialogue has achieved. It also highlights a few anecdotes and metaphors captured during the workshops in the last four years.

Year 2013–2014

‘…Faint traces of a bright light at the end of the tunnel is seen, it is known as the India – Bangladesh relationship’ (EA, 2013).

The first dialogue workshop of the project was conducted in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The stakeholders agreed that all the riparian countries of Brahmaputra Basin have a pressing need to achieve food, water and energy security. To achieve this, countries are searching for solutions through water development projects. But the challenge is that the countries typically begin with national plans, at times relying on knowledge and financing assistance from development partners, without considering the downstream implication of such plans. As Bangladesh is a downstream country, all the participants stressed the need for a basin-wide approach where the management of the river should be based on the principle of the positive sum game (‘win-win’ situation where no one wins at someone else’s expense) and not on the zero sum game (where one party gains at the expense of another). Supporting the idea of co-management of Brahmaputra River, participants emphasized the need for an informal institutional mechanism encompassing technical, professional and political bodies that will inform the dialogues.

A similar country level dialogue was organized in India. The participants highlighted the need for co-management of the river between India and Bangladesh and thus appreciated the dialogue. They also highlighted the need for dialogue within India to resolve country level concerns and inter-state disputes between Assam (downstream state) and Arunachal Pradesh (upstream state) related to infrastructure development. ‘…there is no room for inter-state dialogue for the joint management of the river and thus it is perhaps difficult to create space for joint dialogue with Bangladesh’ (EA, 2013). Since India is a larger country with a decentralized structure of governance as compared to Bangladesh, the management of the river within the country becomes a complex issue. It was also observed that
being an upper riparian country, participants were more eager to discuss inter-state and state-centre disputes when compared to India and Bangladesh concerns. While in Bangladesh country-level workshops, India-Bangladesh cooperation was an important agenda for discussion; the India country-level dialogues emphasized more the effective cooperation within the country (of course an important issue) over transboundary cooperation.

Phase I of the project was concluded through a bilateral regional-level workshop between India and Bangladesh. The aim was to share common opportunities and challenges as identified in the country-level dialogues and exchange of ideas and knowledge between the highly inter-disciplinary stakeholders from both the countries. The key messages that came out from the regional dialogue were – need for information sharing, basin-wide approach and a regional level institution – as the first step towards co-management of the river. The stakeholders of both countries appreciated the opportunity provided for dialogue.

The idea that countries can build effective cooperation through management of water related risks, (e.g. flood) was appreciated by all. As water related disasters in the Brahmaputra Basin are common for both India and Bangladesh, participants felt that there is ample opportunity for cooperation in managing the destructive impacts of water. Participants highlighted that ‘...such cooperation (disaster management) can go beyond political considerations’ (EA, 2013). However, civil society from both countries expressed their concerns related to infrastructure development and its impact on the basin community whose livelihood might get affected by such interventions. While highlighting the role of NGOs in transboundary water management, participants emphasized that transboundary dialogue has to be participatory and inclusive so that everyone’s concerns finds a place. ‘...how much influence they (NGOs and CSOs) have on the state is the question that still begs an answer’ (NG, 2013). An interesting aspect was that although during the country-level workshop in India the focus was mostly on inter-state disputes, at the regional platform such disputes were not discussed. Instead the discussion was more around transboundary cooperation and upstream–downstream concerns. Participants from Bangladesh identified data sharing between India and Bangladesh as a major concern. ‘...lack of information sharing by India can hamper the hydro diplomacy between India and Bangladesh’ (EA, 2013).

In the absence of political participation, among the NGOs, CSOs and academicians, there is a greater consensus that countries should work together to identify avenues of cooperation for better management of the river. While the need to continue the dialogue process at track 2 level was appreciated, at the same time realizing the political dynamics involved in transboundary cooperation, suggestions to move the dialogue to track 1.5 level in the subsequent dialogue workshops were emphasized. A suggestion also emerged to restructure the present initiative into a multilateral dialogue forum involving China, Bhutan, India and Bangladesh. This forum could meet annually at each of the partner countries to discuss opportunities for cooperation. However, participants also acknowledged that dialogue is a long process and may require multi-year effort: ‘...any kind of policy change is a time consuming affair’ (RB, 2013).

Year 2014–2015

‘...there is a need for regional cooperation...where we can sit together to share knowledge and experience’ (RB, 2014).

An interesting change observed during the second phase of country-level dialogue in India was that unlike Phase I, Phase II had a focus on regional cooperation and not interstate or state-centre concerns.
related to managing the river. This could be due to the regional-level workshop of Phase I, which gave a platform to the participants from India and Bangladesh to together discuss and share their concerns. This also sensitized the Indian participants about the downstream concerns. For example, the need for joint research between India and Bangladesh was highlighted as an important prerequisite to balance the development plans in the Brahmaputra Basin.

Although interstate concerns were raised, unlike in Phase I they did not take centre stage. The suggestions that emerged were related to the basin, highlighting that benefits from the river can be designed in an integrated manner through one nodal agency or an apex body governing the river basin. This agency would oversee hydropower, navigation, transport, irrigation, as well as joint research for the basin as a whole. Participants emphasized that the benefits of the river should also be shared on an equitable basis rather than territorial. Access to data and the absence of a mechanism to share data remained a key concern among the participants.

The Dhaka country-level dialogue workshop also brought out similar concerns. Apart from track 2 and 3 this dialogue also included representation from track 1.5 diplomats. Similar to Phase I, in Phase II, Bangladesh participants emphasized the need for a basin-wide approach. ‘...Countries cannot work in isolation...it is important to maintain ecological integrity of the basin’ (EA, 2014). Concerns were raised that there is a lack of transparency and uncertainty of information and as such the downstream states are not aware of plans of the upstream nation, which may in future lead to tension and conflicts. Participants also reflected that individually countries may be analysing parameters for better environmental management but a holistic picture does not seem to emerge, as the objectives of neighbouring countries are not discussed openly.

Phase II of the dialogue workshop concluded with a multi-stakeholder and multilateral regional workshop in India. For the first time there was participation from all of the four riparian countries. While from India and Bangladesh there was participation from SB, from Bhutan and China, participation came from NGOs and influential academicians. The participants from China, while commenting on the hydro-diplomatic relationship between the riparian countries, emphasized that suggestions coming from such dialogue forums are extremely important and need to be communicated to the governments of the respective countries. The Chinese participants shared their experience on Lancang-Mekong long-term cooperation and emphasized the ‘...need to form an integrated institution at a transnational level in resolving disputes and fostering cooperation’ (EA, 2015). While mentioning the significant role played by United Nations in supporting the long term cooperation between upstream and downstream countries of China, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Cambodia in the case of the Mekong, participants urged for similar initiatives for Brahmaputra. There was also emphasis from all the participants from the riparian countries that there is a need to generate international consensus regarding the river, among different countries irrespective of the country being a part of the basin or outside the basin.

A crucial point that emerged from the discussion was that cooperation already exists in terms of monsoon data sharing between China, India and Bangladesh, although bilateral in nature. What emerged from the discussion is that there is a need for continuous data sharing which includes both monsoon and dry season data among all of the four riparian countries. Such continuous free flow of data can promote transparency, thereby reducing mistrust among the countries and can be also seen as a sign of cooperation. Thus, lack of transparency, accountability and sharing of information were identified as the major causes of conflict related to the river. The suggestion came that discussions related to the basin should be open rather than closed and information should be made available in the public domain. This will help to build trust and confidence within, as well as between, the countries. While
Commenting on the fact that transboundary issues are largely political and motivated by national interests, the need of the hour is to translate the technical research into policy advocacy material with a purpose of pushing the political will towards effective water governance. The participants emphasized that there is a ‘...need to generate political willingness’ (EA, 2015).

During the regional dialogue there was overwhelming consensus among the dialogue participants across the four riparian countries that such a dialogue/meeting platform definitely helps to ease the tension between multiple stakeholders and develops trust. Effective cooperation can range from simple information and data sharing to basin-wide cooperation on planning and management of the river. While the latter remains an aspiration, there is increasing evidence during the dialogue meetings that countries are trying to find ways to bring in cooperation through information and data sharing. Another interesting aspect of the dialogue process was that while the number of participants has increased many fold in the last three years, participants who joined the dialogue in 2013 continued to be a part of the dialogue forum. This continuity in the stakeholders’ participation has allowed personal relationships to grow and stakeholders stay in touch outside the dialogue meetings too. This aspect is important because it has also helped the dialogue to slowly move towards a problem solving approach where the stakeholders are willing to look for solutions and to sort out their differences. The best part of such a process is that the ownership of the cooperation agenda remains with the concerned riparian countries, which ensures commitment, trust and endurance (Jägerskog & Zeitoun, 2009).

Discussion

This paper highlights four key insights. First, in the Brahmaputra Basin, each riparian has its own national interests. As track 1 diplomats, i.e. government officials, are constrained by national policies designed to pursue the country’s own interests, little progress has been made at the government-to-government track 1 level in achieving regional cooperation or in developing a common goal for the management of the river. Further, the riparian countries of the Brahmaputra Basin are at present positioned differently due to their socio-economic, political and technical capacities. This existing power asymmetry mediates any discussion or negotiation related to transboundary cooperation and also prevents equitable outcomes. Hence, due to such complexity, state alone cannot bring change and needs to be supplemented by other forms of diplomacy like track 2 and track 1.5 diplomacy. While such multi-track diplomacy cannot be seen as the substitute to state (track 1) diplomacy, multi-track dialogue can act as platform to pursue positive interactions. Such a dialogue process provides an informal platform and allows open discussion among multiple stakeholders free from bureaucratic constraints. It also provides a space for both current and former bureaucrats to interact with technical experts and arrive at practical solutions, which when fed into policy channels have the potential to bring about sustainable change. Therefore, such a dialogue process can be viewed as the supplement or extension to existing state-diplomacy in the Brahmaputra Basin, which can help in fostering cooperation in the future.

Second, the multi-track nature of the dialogue enables involvement of many stakeholders across sectors and also brings in different views. For example, the inclusion of civil society actors has been useful for involving local stakeholders as they can play an important role in ensuring transparency and political support (Huntjens & Man de, 2017). The involvement of the scientific community will lead to generation of knowledge based on science, which will lead to improved management and informed decision making. Since, at present, there are differences of opinion related to the utilization of the river, such...
multi-track platforms could provide space to bring in a host of overlooked perspectives to the table. Acceptance of such diverse perspectives and views is hoped to bring more integrated and sustainable outcomes (Warner, 2005). The dialogue process has therefore paved a way to recognize the need to involve multiple voices, while dealing with a complex, diverse and dynamic river basin like Brahmaputra.

Third, the continuous dialogue between the riparian countries, at multiple levels and by involving multiple stakeholders, helps in ‘encouraging transformation’, as mentioned by Jägerskog & Zeitoun (2009). The continuous process can influence or persuade the powerful side to behave like a basin leader. Although, the power asymmetry between the riparian countries of Brahmaputra Basin is unavoidable, the dialogue process aims to reduce the destructive manifestation of the power by persuading the basin hegemon to behave like basin leaders, and make power an enabling factor for transboundary cooperation. This is particularly the case while dealing with India and China. The aim has been to identify common interests between these two powerful upper riparian countries and also identify factors that shape visions of basin development and ‘water cooperation’ for them (Armitage et al., 2015).

Lastly, the process itself is as important as the outcome of the process. While creating a multilateral institution at the regional level is important for the Brahmaputra Basin, developing a basin-level institution requires years of deliberation with patience. Time spent building effective communications, working relationships and a level playing field of knowledge and skills is an essential investment to arrive at such regional cooperation (Jägerskog & Zeitoun, 2009). The process could be long but such a process enables the generation of the ‘spirit of cooperation’ among the riparian countries so that they cooperate not just to avoid conflict or to be a part of the policy game but because they see the benefit of such cooperation.

Conclusion

In the Brahmaputra Basin, while acute militarized conflict has not occurred between basin states related to water sharing, infrastructure development projects, water scarcity and water quality concerns have already caused political tension, mistrust and suspicion between the states. Such an antagonistic relationship between the states has led to inefficiency in pure government mediation. Domestic interests of the riparian countries and bilateral bargaining related to the utilization of the BRB have constrained multilateral discussion and regional cooperation. Hence, for Brahmaputra Basin, new approaches of diplomacy at the multilateral level involving multiple stakeholders can act as a crucial addition and complement to the existing track 1 approaches as it brings new ideas and new actors on board.

For transboundary river basins, a shift of gear from formal to informal diplomacy has started to gain importance. For example, in the case of the Nile River Basin, the Nile Basin Initiative, which is a formal government-level diplomacy for Nile waters’ negotiation, is not solving the stalemate in the basin. There has been a lot of emphasis that multi-track diplomacy should be employed to build confidence among the basin states and their people. Similarly, for the Mekong, multi-track diplomacy and dialogue by involving all relevant stakeholders has become a prominent proposal for better management of the Mekong River Basin. Such initiatives in other river basins can be the source of learning for BRB, where the problems are too complex to be resolved by a single approach. This paper concludes that currently, negotiation for a basin-wide treaty for cooperation through track 1 diplomacy, in the BRB, is a
non-starter as it may result in asymmetric cooperation, opening up ground for future conflicts. To avoid such asymmetric cooperation, information rich multilateral informal dialogues such as the ‘Brahmaputra Dialogue’, need to take place to develop an accepted definition of cooperation that meets the needs of co-riparian states.

Disclosure statement

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