

The challenge of multilateralism on the Ganges River

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Abstract

The Ganges River is traditionally governed bilaterally, with India at the centre of interactions. Bilateralism is arguable leveraged to India's advantage on a national and transboundary level. This is problematic as issues such as climate change require holistic and basin-wide solutions. Initiatives such as China's Belt and Road strategy are challenging Indian hegemony and pushing for multilateralism. The implications of this for transboundary water governance are investigated through discourse and the concept of discourse inertia. This shows how India is seeking to leverage its position in the sub-region through bilateralism and discursive tactics in response to China's increasing influence.

Keywords: Discourse; Ganges River; Governance; South Asia; Transboundary water

Introduction

The Ganges River is integral to the social and economic well-being of South Asia. The river basin encompasses India, Nepal and Bangladesh, and its fertile soil and hydropower potential make it essential to local livelihoods. However, the basin suffers from endemic poverty, over-abstraction of ground water, political instability, severe pollution, border disputes and natural disasters (FAO, 2011).

Despite being shared by three riparian states, relations over transboundary water tend to occur on a bilateral basis. The majority of the institutions and agreements signed between the states are bilateral. This prevents a coordinated and integrated approach to management, such as measures to deal with water-related shocks, particularly genuine climate change adaptation and mitigation measures that tend to require basin-wide cooperation (Hanasz, 2017). India is often accused of the hegemonic activity and dominating the basin (Hanasz, 2015; Pandey, 2016). Bilateralism is arguably a significant tactic for India in maintaining its favourable position and pursuing its national interests on the Ganges. As such, relations appear to have become 'set' with India at the centre of transboundary interactions that are often accused of being in its favour.

China has traditionally had little interaction with the countries of South Asia over transboundary water. India and China share the Brahmaputra River, cooperation over which has occurred on a limited

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bilateral basis. China is not a riparian of the Ganges, and so its involvement in the river has historically been limited. However, China's participation in the Ganges basin is increasing, largely through its Belt and Road strategy. This may be challenging Indian bilateralism on the Ganges and influencing how the river is managed. Research on the Belt and Road strategy is relatively young and little has been done on how the strategy will impact political relations over resources such as water (Williams, 2019a). Therefore, this paper investigates the impact of China's involvement in the Ganges basin, largely through the Belt and Road strategy, and how it challenges India's traditional position and interests. Discourse is utilised to unpack riparian interactions, as it is indicative of their priorities and interests.

The discourse dimension

Institutional and governance approaches have made a significant contribution to the study of transboundary water governance. However, knowledge can be furthered through the incorporation of the ideational dimension, which is often under developed (Fischer, 1998; Phillips *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, an approach centred on discourse is undertaken to explore transboundary water governance and relations on the Ganges River.

Discourse encompasses the ideas, concepts and categories that are produced, reproduced and evolved through interactions, which gives social and physical relations meaning (Jägerskog, 2002; Mirumachi, 2015). Discourses can become sanctioned when they are undisputed and dominant (Jägerskog, 2002). Policy-makers become constrained by the assumptions within the sanctioned discourse, which delimits potential policy outcomes (Dayton, 2000, Gerlak & Schmeier, 2014).

In the study of environmental issues, several discourse analytical approaches have been applied. Dryzek (2013) and Hajer (1995) are prominent in their Foucauldian influenced discourse analysis of the environmental policy realm. Dryzek utilises a categorising approach to discourse, grouping them based on their constitutive elements. He then analyses the material within these categories to locate key elements, which leads to identifying the main discourses in the environmental realm. These can be used as a foundation for understanding how water resources are perceived and managed.

Hajer (1995) operationalises discourse theory to construct an analytical framework for the political discourse analysis in the environmental realm. He formulates an argumentative approach that directs attention to the analysis of discourse coalitions, metaphors and storylines. Politics is the struggle for discursive hegemony between actors. The arguments between actors are determined by the credibility, acceptability and trust that they possess and occur within the context of existing institutional practices.

Several studies also demonstrate the utility of the discourse analysis in interpreting water governance issues. Allan (2005) examines water's role in environmental/socio-economic discourse in semi-arid countries and compares a country's management approach to a sanctioned discourse. Policymaking is done by coalitions, and problems are added or removed from the agenda depending on who can best construct and deliver their interests through arguments. The role of the elite is emphasised although individuals and activists initially bring issues to the polity's attention.

The role of sanctioned discourse in water policy on the Jordan River is investigated by Jägerskog (2002). Sanctioned discourses are found to define the boundaries within which policies can be pursued and so indicate what actions may be politically feasible. Framing issues as risks, even if they do not pose a threat, is also found to be a strategy to control water resources.

It is demonstrated that the involvement of politics and power interests means that water issues are susceptible to being politicised and securitised (Allan & Mirumachi, 2010; Dalby, 2016). Zeitoun *et al.* (2011) show this process to be a form of discursive power that is reliant on the securitising actor's power to convince the audience of the speech act and elicit a particular response.

In India, Mehta (2001, 2007) examines how narratives of scarcity can be used to legitimise otherwise controversial water projects. These obscure the true culprits of water scarcity and compound inequalities in access and control over resources in India. More specifically relating to the Ganges River, Mirumachi (2013, 2015) employs discourse to analyse riparian interactions to investigate the official discourse in bilateral relations over the Ganges. This shows how transboundary water management is framed by decision makers, the importance of power and the wider geopolitical context. Her study is founded on the ideational power of discursive acts and based on conflict/cooperation interactions. She addresses shortcomings in the treatment of conflict and cooperation. The dominance of elite decision makers and the hydraulic mission are also identified.

More generally relating to the Ganges River, Hanasz (2017) considers the Ganges–Brahmaputra River basin from a problem-shed perspective. She analyses the role of international actors in transboundary water governance and how this can be improved in relation to instigating greater collective action amongst the river's riparian countries. Zeitoun *et al.* (2016) investigate the dynamics of cooperation and conflict when considering how riparian states contest hegemonic configurations in transboundary river basins. They found the Ganges basin to be largely static, with India being the basin hegemon and relations occurring bilaterally.

While highly informative, no contemporary study considers the role of China in the transboundary water governance of the Ganges River through a discursive lens. Therefore, this paper represents a novel approach to the exploration of transboundary water governance in South Asia. In particular, it sheds light on the implications of the introduction of a new major hegemonic player in the basin for transboundary water relations and governance.

Discourse and policy change

Policy change may be indicated by changes in the sanctioned discourse. Change may occur due to an exogenous event or crisis or be incentivised by foreign governments or financial/donor institutions. Actors may employ discursive strategies to deliberately seek change, and such strategies include constructing narratives, counter-narratives, issue-linkage, exclusion strategies and the use of normative power. The power, position and resources as well as the level of change being sought determine how successful actors are in implementing change (Leipold & Winkel, 2013). It is noteworthy that change may not be genuine as elements from other discourse can be co-opted into the sanctioned discourse. This gives the appearance of change while the core ideas remain unchanged (Christoff, 2013).

The role of ideas and discourse is often absent when considering change/stasis dynamics within policy. The concept of discourse inertia is used to direct focus onto the resistance to change and the relationship between discourse, actors and institutions (Williams, 2019b, 2020a). This is informed by discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2006, 2010) and the discursive-institutional spiral (Den Bestin *et al.*, 2014).

Discourse is incorporated into institutional theories by recognition of the discourse that actors engage in when creating, considering and/or legitimising ideas regarding political action within the institutional context. Interactions generate ideas, which are enshrined within institutions. When these ideas and the

discourse those actors uphold regarding that institution change, institutional change may also occur. The institutional context shapes discourses and determines where they matter (Schmidt, 2006). Ideas are classified as ones of policy, policy programme or public philosophy according to their impact on policy change.

Accordingly, more changeable ideas are policy ideas, which have less of an impact on policy than policy programme or public philosophical ideas. The problems for policies to solve are defined by policy programme ideas, and these are underlined by public philosophical ideas. These ideas appeal to deeper values and understandings of knowledge and society. When change occurs at this level, it is considered revolutionary (Schmidt, 2011). This is extended to discourse, everyday level narratives are held as more changeable, and those that are institutionalised are more persistent. A discourse that becomes privileged contains core ideas, beliefs and interests, and so will resist change.

Discourse inertia explores how actors may uphold certain narratives and resist change even when they promote policies that may not be the most appropriate. Inertia is taken as the continued promotion and dominance of a perception of reality. As a result, certain narratives or ideas are constantly reproduced. Sanctioned discourses are likely to be more prone to inertia due to powerful entrenched interests and path-dependent tendencies. When discourses become sanctioned, they must be constantly reinforced to maintain their dominance. This can result in certain narratives that comprise the discourse reaching an ideational status and becoming privileged. These narratives are ones that are taken for granted and prone to discourse inertia. More shallow narratives can work alongside these privileged narratives. These narratives are more fluid and can be used to achieve an objective or outside interest, as they are more easily manipulated.

The change/stasis dynamics of discourse is demonstrated by extending the discursive-institutional spiral (Den Besten *et al.*, 2014). The spiral illustrates how discourses evolve through interactions with institutional initiatives, actors and their ideas and subject areas. The result of these interactions is a spiral, the loops of which start with institutionalisation of a discourse. This sparks discussion and debate and the involvement of new actors. These new actors bring new ideas and concepts, which expand the discourse. This discourse is then institutionalised, which starts the next loop of the spiral. Power can be exercised through actors or ideas being excluded or included within the process (Den Besten *et al.*, 2014).

A process akin to institutional path dependency can occur within the discursive-institutional spiral, resulting in discourse inertia. The entry of new actors and ideas into the discourse is restricted, and so the spiral is prevented from expanding and evolving. Institutionalised discursive elements may be reinforced along the spiral loops, which then act to exclude other elements or actors. The introduction of new ideas is further restricted, as actors are unable to access the discourse.

Methods

The discourse analysis was undertaken to investigate the governance and management of the Ganges River. The elements discussed above are used to inform analysis, as there is no standardised approach for conducting the discourse analysis (Gill, 2000). The aim of analysis was to identify each states' sanctioned discourse concerning the Ganges River from 2012 to 2017. This is then contextualised through the inclusion of the background of the Ganges, detailed below, to explore the role of China and the influence it has on bilateralism and the wider regional geopolitics surrounding the river.

The Ganges River system

Within South Asia, and most developing countries, the state generally is dominant in water governance. This results in the state's role being supported by bureaucratic management policies and governments that resist conceding sovereignty (Jägerskog, 2002; Mirumachi, 2015). Consequently, the governance of transboundary rivers is often managed according to the hydraulic mission. This approach to water management is top-down, engineering and technocratic. The focus is on the construction of hydraulic infrastructure to control the river and prevent it from going unused or 'wasted'. The approach prescribes engineering river flows by undertaking large dam and diversion projects (Christoff, 2013; Leipold & Winkel, 2013; Gerlak & Schmeier, 2014).

India's water relations with its neighbours are traditionally defined by hydraulic infrastructure established under bilateral agreements. On the Ganges (Figure 1), India and Nepal's relationship was established in 1920 with the Sarada Treaty. The treaty involved the construction of a barrage on the Mahakali River in Nepal, which was connected to a power station in British India. Nepal was unsatisfied with its share of water under the treaty and constantly, but unsuccessfully, sought to increase its allocation. The regime was in place from 1920 until 1996 (Salman & Uprety, 2002).

The next agreement involved building a multipurpose barrage in Nepal to prevent flooding of the Kosi River. The Kosi was portrayed as an environmental threat due to damage from floods but also as an opportunity as its economic value could be increased through irrigation and hydropower



Fig. 1. Map of the Ganges River system (Adapted from Mirza, 1998).

(Mirumachi, 2015). The Kosi Agreement was signed in 1954 and was the first transboundary agreement couched as mutually benefitting both countries (Salman & Uprety, 2002). However, the terms for benefit sharing were highly politicised. Political opposition in Nepal held the agreement to be unfair, as Nepal gained no benefits but conceded territorial rights. As a result, the treaty was extensively amended in 1966 to address Nepali concerns (Salman & Uprety, 2002; Mirumachi, 2015).

Similarly, the Gandak Agreement is also largely concerned with flood control but opportunistically included hydropower and irrigation. However, the signing of the agreement in 1959 again sparked political protests in Nepal. Sovereignty concerns resurfaced over Indian construction in Nepal's territory. There was also protest over the unequal distribution of benefits, as Nepal had to ensure a certain flow to the project, which ultimately restricted its water use. The Gandak Agreement was amended in 1964 (Mirumachi, 2015).

While the two agreements represent a shared intention to develop the rivers, the mechanisms for measuring equity were left unclear. Indian discourse sought to gloss over this lack of clarity and normalise bilateral cooperation on the basis of joint river development (Mirumachi, 2015). Bilateral relations justified on the grounds of joint development projects allowed India to gain benefits from the rivers that it would not have been entitled to as the lower riparian.

In 1991, Nepal and India signed the Tanakpur Agreement, which was a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on the Mahakali River. The MOU was to build the Tanakpur barrage for irrigation in India to replace the Sarada barrage. Part of the barrage needed to be built in Nepal and so issues of land and sovereignty were involved. These were exacerbated by issues of inundation and land erosion caused by the project (Salman & Uprety, 2002). To emphasise its claim on the land and water, the Nepalese Government sought to frame the project as an international one. In response, India began unilateral construction on the Indian parts of the project (Mirumachi, 2015). The project was securitised by the Prime Minister who stated that construction had to be completed before the monsoon. He framed the project as a permanent solution to problems of inundation and erosion, which invalidated other options (Bhasin, 2005). The security framing was successful, as the Nepalese Government granted permission for construction on their territory.

Political opposition within Nepal challenged the legality of the MOU, and in 1992, the Supreme Court ruled that the MOU was a treaty and so required parliamentary ratification. However, the construction of the project was almost complete and India would not renegotiate. The treaty has never been ratified by Nepal's parliament and the controversy remains (Salman & Uprety, 2002). Through securitisation and unilateral construction, India institutionalised its use of the Mahakali River in a manner that would not have been acceptable under normal bilateral negotiations. The confusion over the legality of the project in Nepal allowed India to seek benefits as per the original Indian proposed MOU (Mirumachi, 2015).

In a bid to end the internal Tanakpur dispute and to gain a more favourable position on the Mahakali River, Nepal proposed another agreement with India, the 1996 Mahakali Treaty. This treaty took over the Tanakpur projects and proposed the Pancheswar project. It essentially validated the Tanakpur project and endorsed the new project. The treaty emphasises an integrated approach and was heralded by both Indian and Nepali politicians as progressing bilateral relations (Salman & Uprety, 2002; Bhasin, 2005). Despite the cooperative discourse, the Mahakali Treaty legitimised Indian securitisation and actions regarding its control over the Tanakpur project. There was also an undercurrent of debate concerning the deeper-seated issue of water allocation and benefit sharing under the Mahakali regime, which provided sticking points in relations (Mirumachi, 2015).

Despite Bangladesh and India sharing 54 rivers, their water relationship largely concerns the 1996 Ganges Water Sharing Treaty. It originated from a protracted dispute, which started in 1951 between India and East Pakistan. The dispute involved the Farakka barrage, built on the Ganges just before the border. The project includes a link canal to divert water from the barrage to keep the Calcutta port navigable (Earle *et al.*, 2015). Despite strong objections from East Pakistan, India began unilateral construction. India claimed that as the majority of the Ganges fell within its border, it was not an international river. Therefore, it did not recognise Pakistan's position and negotiations were prevented from moving up the political agenda (Salman & Uprety, 2002).

When Bangladesh declared independence in 1971, India was the first country to recognise the new state and provided aid and assistance, establishing a close relationship between the countries. The spirit of cooperation was furthered following a Joint Declaration in 1972, which established the Joint Rivers Commission. However, the diversion of the Ganges quickly became an issue in relations. Work on the barrage was completed in 1971, and so it was considered a *fait accompli* and Bangladesh formally acknowledged the barrage in the 1972 Joint Declaration. Therefore, the issue was the barrage's management, namely the amount of water to be diverted from the Ganges during the lean season and how to augment flow (Salman & Uprety, 2002).

In 1975, a Partial Accord was signed for India to use the project and assess its impact. While the accord was intended to run through the lean period, India continued diverting water during the monsoon season. Once the project was functioning, Bangladesh's position to halt or limit operations was significantly reduced. India had achieved its objective of operationalising the project and did so through bilateral negotiations and not unilateral actions. Meetings over the barrage were dominated by the issue of supply augmentation, where the two countries took rigid stances. India proposed to augment the flow by using the Brahmaputra's water. This was strongly rejected in Bangladesh, who proposed building storage reservoirs in Nepal (Salman & Uprety, 2002; Pandey, 2016).

Discourse during this period was highly politicised. It took a change in both governments in 1996 for progress to be made. The problem was recognised as being political rather than technical, and so settlement took a political form. The issue of augmenting the Ganges flow was delinked, and the Chief Minister of West Bengal was involved in the negotiation process. These concessions led to the Ganges Treaty being signed later that year (Pandey, 2016). The Ganges Treaty runs for 30 years, as it is intended as an interim measure while the issue of augmentation is resolved (Salman & Uprety, 2002).

Despite the Ganges Treaty, concerns over upstream infrastructure projects remain in Bangladesh. Notably, India's planned National River Linking project, in which the Himalayan rivers are a major component. India claims the project will transfer water from areas of surplus to ones of deficit and by doing so utilise currently wasted water. There are no agreements between India and Bangladesh over their other shared rivers, and the Ganges Treaty only covers lean season flow. The project could have adverse environmental and social impacts in Bangladesh, particularly if India takes a unilateral approach (Shah & Amerasinghe, 2016).

China and the Belt and Road strategy

More recently, China's Belt and Road strategy is influencing water relations. In the context of the Ganges River, this influence is largely in the form of hydraulic infrastructure projects, often undertaken by Chinese state-owned enterprises (Table 1). Since 1999, China has prioritised hydropower projects.

Table 1. Treaties relating to the Ganges River system.

River	Date	Treaty	States	Main purpose	Allocation mechanism	Details
Kosi	1954 (1966)	Agreement on the Kosi Project	India, Nepal	Projects: irrigation, hydropower	Nepal retains right to divert upstream water, “as may be required” India has right to regulate balance	Broad benefits: irrigation/ hydropower, navigation, fishing, and afforestation
Gandak	1959 (1964)	Agreement on the Gandak Irrigation and Power Project	India, Nepal	Project: irrigation, hydropower	Diversions for irrigation and power generation set in a monthly schedule, about 60% to Nepal and 40% to India. Nepal can irrigate with water above these requirement	Broad benefits to each: land acquisition, power generation, capital resources (primarily from India), irrigation, and transportation
Ganges	1996	Treaty on Sharing of the Ganga/Ganges Waters at Farakka	India, Bangladesh	Allocation, boundary agreement	Equitable allocation %, Schedule established to allocate the flow at Farakka: flow of 70,000 cusecs or less – 50% to each; 70,000–75,000 cusecs – 35,000 cusecs to Bangladesh, rest to India; 75,000 cusecs or more – 40,000 cusecs to India, rest to Bangladesh	1977 agreement was initially for five years. Short-term agreements reached in 1982 and 1985. A final agreement was reached December 1996
Mahakali	1996	Treaty Concerning the Integrated Development of the Mahakali Barrage, including Sarada Barrage, Tanakpur Barrage and Pancheshwar Project	India, Nepal	Project: hydropower, irrigation, flood protection	Division of energy and schedule of water allocation: Either party can review allocation every 10 years	Combines three earlier agreements

Source: Wolf (1998).

Consequently, Chinese enterprises and banks have become the largest builders and financiers in hydro-power construction globally (Jensen-Cormier, 2017). Hydraulic infrastructure is often a point of contention in transboundary water relations due to perceived or actual changes in fluvial flows caused by such projects (De Stefano *et al.*, 2010; Williams, 2018). Hydraulic infrastructure is also a visible demonstration of a state's power and ability and so can function to extend geopolitical influence (Williams, 2019c).

Generally, China prefers bilateralism in international relations and ventures regarding water are no exception. For example, internationally, China has refused to sign the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention¹ and, in Southeast Asia, refrained from signing the 1995 Mekong Agreement². Bilaterally, China's water relations include signing an MOU with India to provide limited hydrological data regarding the Brahmaputra, bilateral agreements regarding border rivers with Russia, Mongolia and North Korea and a water diversion agreement with Kazakhstan (Li & Wu, 2016).

The Belt and Road strategy differs from China's previous water relations, as it is a multilateral initiative with a broad purview. The initiative looks to increase connectivity across the region, mainly through infrastructure development. The South Asian region and hydropower development form significant parts of the initiative's objectives (Williams, 2019a). China has pledged at least US\$1 trillion to projects under the strategy and provides cheap loans for projects that development banks will not finance (Eisenman & Stewart, 2017; Hoare, 2018). These include power projects, which comprise 40% of planned projects, with coal and hydropower being the main investment focus (Asian Power, 2017).

In South Asia, Bangladesh is participating in the initiative, formally joining in 2016 (Das, 2017). China plans to spend US\$30 billion on infrastructure projects (Stacey, 2018). As a result, China and Bangladesh are forming close economic ties, with China displacing Indian investment dominance (B&R News, 2019). Bangladesh is strategically important in Chinese plans, as it links South Asia with Southeast Asia and provides maritime access. As such, it forms a key component of the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar economic corridor (Shahriar, 2017).

Nepal is also part of the Belt and Road strategy. The two countries signed an MOU for Nepal's participation in 2017 (Shrestha, 2017). However, Nepal's enthusiasm varies depending on its national political climate (Lo & Zhou, 2017). Chinese projects and investments in Nepal include several large scale hydropower projects and the associated connecting infrastructure (Murton *et al.*, 2016). Traditionally, Nepal relied on India for trade and in developing its hydropower potential. The Belt and Road, therefore, presents new opportunities for increased connectivity and trade as well as a reduction in dependence on India (Shrestha, 2017). Significantly, hydropower projects in Nepal are being undertaken by Chinese state-owned enterprises. These projects are being built on tributaries of the Ganges, and so have implications for India and Bangladesh. India is the only country in the region to actively reject the Belt and Road.

¹ 1997 Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses: http://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/8_3_1997.pdf.

² 1995 Agreement on the Cooperation of the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin: <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/agreement-Apr95.pdf>.

Document selection and discourse analysis

The discourse analysis was conducted on documents over a five-year period (2012–2017), through coding discourses into broad categories according to the water governance or management approach. The analysis occurred primarily on official national documents, as these contain the sanctioned approach to the governance of the river. This allowed the privilege narratives to be located, which indicates if a discursive change is occurring. National documents, as opposed to those from bilateral institutions, were found to be more revealing of national interests and perceptions. Details of the types of documents analysed are provided in Table 2.

Initially, discourses can be coded into ones belonging to the hydraulic mission and ones that do not. Guidance can be found from the environmental realm and previous studies. Adger *et al.* (2001) find that discourses in four global environmental issues can be divided into being Global Environmental Management (GEM) or Populists discourses. The four issues investigated were desertification, deforestation, climate change and biodiversity loss, which are the focus of the majority of institutions and policies that surround international agreements and call for global action and solutions. Each issue was found to contain a dominant managerial/GEM discourse and a competing populist discourse. Alongside these are heterodox discourses that deny or contain alternative perspectives. While present in all the examined domains, it was only in the climate change realm that denial-based discourses were found to be influential.

The two discourses frequently and repeatedly overlap and redefine each other. They cannot be taken as constants or exclusionary. The discourses can ‘opt-in’ to certain parts of each other to try to influence a particular policy. For example, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or community-based organisations commonly advocate populist discourse but can employ mechanisms or initiatives of GEM discourse to input into intergovernmental policy debates. Conversely, a populist discourse that promotes community-based approaches can be used by state and donor policies, who typically subscribe to

Table 2. Types of government documents relating to the Ganges system.

Country	Source	Type of document
India	Ministry of External Affairs	Parliamentary questions Media briefings Speech transcripts Opinion pieces Official responses/statements Interviews
	Parliament	Questions and answers
China	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Official responses/statements
	Belt and Road Portal	News articles
Bangladesh	Joint Rivers Commission	Press release
	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Press release Statements
Nepal	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Press release Speech transcripts Media briefings
	Ministry of Energy	Bilateral minutes
	Water and Energy Commission Secretariat	Plans and policies

managerial discourse. However, it is debatable if this co-opting populist discourse leads to the decentralisation of power to the community level or to the deconcentration of state power (Adger *et al.*, 2001).

This broad approach of categorising discourses provides a general picture of the situation and forces at play. It demonstrates that adopting the dominant GEM discourse automatically limits potential solutions. As the discourses are active on the global scale, they cannot capture the diversity and complexity present on the local level. However, the dominance of the state at the transboundary level makes it plausible for these discourses to be operational in the transboundary water context.

Table 3 indicates possible characteristics of the dominant GEM, or hydraulic mission, and populist discourses in the transboundary water context. Given the potential for tension in transboundary water relations and the lack of a strong denial discourse, an additional category for security discourse has been included. It is anticipated that heterodox discourses will emerge as analysis progresses. If any of these are found to be significant, they will be categorised and coded. The categories are based on a review of the available literature and may need further revision; however, they serve as a starting point. Categorising discourses can construct an overall understanding of the situation and aid identification of areas of potential conflict of interest. These situations can be examined in more detail to locate any additional discourses and form a more detailed and accurate understanding.

Broad categories can help distinguish which discourse is dominant at which time and so indicate discourse inertia or evolution. Potential areas of discursive conflict, evolution or inertia may show the factors and interests behind these situations. This can indicate why certain governance and management structures emerge and at what point they will be difficult to sustain. Once categories are identified and refined, patterns within the data, particularly areas of (in)consistency, are sought. The functions of discursive mechanisms can then be considered and tentative hypotheses drawn (Gill, 2000). Identifying such areas signifies potential areas of discursive struggle, as inconsistencies may be due to a need to co-opt an element of a competing discourse to maintain legitimacy.

The desired solution to an issue can be deduced by identifying what is understood to be the problem and how it is framed. Discursive mechanisms such as storylines/narratives, metaphors, framing and position aid interpretation. How actors utilise and manipulate storylines is also informative. The institutionalisation of discourse is considered through how discourse coalitions, storylines and institutions interact. Uptake and continued reaffirmation of discourses within institutions can be compared with the dominant discourse/narratives and subsequent policy decisions. The analysis of the institutional component is aided by the discursive-institutional spiral to breakdown the process of institutionalisation and identify where new discursive elements may become incorporated by institutions.

Analysis and results

The Ganges countries' discourses are dominated by issues of infrastructure construction to control the river. The basin is also home to a power struggle between China and India. Both are seeking strategic influence in the basin's countries. Consequently, alignments led by either nation are forming through different bilateral and regional initiatives based around the region's rivers. This is potentially changing the configuration of the basin. However, the extent that the move to increased regional cooperation through multilateralism can challenge the embedded bilateral institutions and narratives is questionable.

Most interactions are bilateral in nature, and this appears to be reinforced through Indian discursive tactics. For example, negotiations over the Teesta Agreement appear to have stalled due to West

Table 3. Features of water discourses.

Features	Discourse			
	Hydraulic mission	Populist	Security	
Commonalities	There is a water crisis that requires actions. Impacts will be far reaching: social, political and economic. Huge repercussions for food security and livelihoods/development			
Core Elements		Technocratic, supply side orientated, big infrastructure favoured. Strong elements of neo-liberalism and some neo-Malthusian elements. Regulatory and administrative approach. Water in the domain of the state and should be utilised	Reaction against large scale infrastructure and top-down management approach. Emphasis on local community and small scale projects. Advocates alternative technology and community management. Not a supply problem but a governance one	Opaque decision making, legitimisation of otherwise unacceptable action, control of information, neo-Malthusian and security language. Issue of national interest
Actor Portrayal	Heroes	Hydrocracy, state, bureaucrats, national civil servants, WB and similar donors, some scientists, construction companies	Civil society, local water users, activists	State, strategists, military
	Villains	Local people, weather, riparian state/upstream users	State, bureaucracy, construction companies, trans corporations	Riparian state, terrorist groups
	Victims	Local people, cities, economy	Local people, environment	National locals, both rural and in cities, state sovereignty
Perception of External Intervention		Essential	Mixed, generally negative, community focus and initiatives are required	Essential, state-centric (limited foreign intervention), justification of otherwise unacceptable measures
Interactions between Discourses and Policy		Common interventions: Large scale infrastructure, technology/knowledge transfer, markets/value pricing, international agreements and regulation (including river basin organisation (RBO)) and financial transfers/compensation payments. Focus often on supply side initiatives	Community level initiatives, small scale, and local ownership. Can initiate transnational movements in certain issue areas	Military action (rare – often just presence), lack of information sharing, mediation, increased infrastructure building, increased storage capacity
Common Advocates		Hydrocracy, state, bureaucrats, national civil servants, World Bank (WB) and similar donors, some scientists, construction companies	NGOs, advocacy groups, local people	State, strategists, military, extremist groups

Bengal's objections (MEA, 2013, 2017a). This is despite frequent iterations by India regarding its commitments to cooperation and reference to past cooperative efforts (MEA, 2017a). By conceding to West Bengal, the Centre avoids incurring domestic opposition. Therefore, it is likely politically convenient, domestically and internationally, for India to maintain the current impasse. While not widely mentioned in the available documents, India's National River Linking Project involves diverting water from the Teesta to the Ganges at the Farakka barrage, a move Bangladesh resists (MEA, 2015). Therefore, India may be seeking a delay on the Teesta Agreement until it has completed its national project.

As the weaker and lower riparian country, Bangladesh has little resource available to it when exerting a claim over transboundary rivers. Discursive tactics are employed in an effort to strengthen its position. Transboundary rivers tend to be framed as 'common rivers', which alludes to the rivers' roles as common resources to which all riparian's share rights (MFA, 2016a, 2016b). Resolving issues such as the Teesta agreement are implicitly linked to achieving regional stability and development, giving the issue greater normative weight (MFA, 2015). By pointing out that the upstream countries do not have the sole claim over the water Bangladesh highlights its entitlement. Further, the Ganges River is referred to as the Padma, the river's national name in Bangladesh, in dealings with India to further its claim (MFA, 2016a, 2016b).

According to India's Ministry of External Affairs, cooperation with Nepal in hydropower and flood management needs to expand (MEA, 2014a, 2016c). India describes there being 'tremendous potential' for cooperation, but this has been 'largely untapped', implying both sides are losing out (MEA, 2016a:12, 2014b:8). The obvious solution is to exploit this opportunity. India employs urgent narratives to raise issues up the political agenda. Rhetoric such as 'expeditiously', 'urge' and 'proceed faster' are frequently used in reference to hydropower projects in Nepal. India is pushing for the development of the large hydropower projects that are currently under discussion. It believes that these will act as a 'catalyst' for further projects of this size and take advantage of the wasted resource (MEA, 2014a).

India frames hydropower cooperation as being for Nepal's benefit. It links the development of hydropower in Nepal to increased economic growth and being the solution to Nepal's 'chronic power woes'. India's desire to purchase electricity is positioned secondary to these objectives (MEA, 2014a, 2014b). India recognises Nepali apprehension by explicitly stating that there is 'no intention of taking away Nepal's resources'. Instead, India would be 'purchasing' the surplus (MEA, 2014a:10). India has reframed Nepal's concern, which has the effect of removing it as a legitimate issue and reframes hydropower construction as being the obvious solution to Nepal's problems. When coupled with the narrative linking hydropower to economic development and greater social well-being, India presents a strong case for cooperation over large hydropower projects.

Discourse originating from Nepal aligns with Indian discourse in that it pushes for cooperation in hydropower. Hydropower is linked to the country's socio-economic development but also perceived as being the foundation for cooperation with its neighbours (MoFA, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a). The nations' 'huge potential' for hydropower is frequently stressed. Nepal's water resources are frequently described as 'rich'. Statements are often targeted at enticing foreign investment in Nepal's hydropower sector. Therefore, the abundance and economic benefits of the resource are emphasised to appeal to potential investors (MoFA, 2017b, 2017c).

The hydropower narrative is linked to energy security in Nepal's discourse (MoFA, 2017a, 2017d). Energy is a more traditional concern for states and is generally higher on the political agenda than water due to its links to the economy and national development. This association raises hydropower up the political agenda, making it an issue of priority and national interest. Explicit reference to security

makes the issue amenable to securitisation, and so extraordinary action can be taken to secure investment and construct projects. Elevating the issue may be to push the implementation of the Power Trade Agreement signed in 2014 between India and Nepal. Nepal has stated that to accelerate large hydropower projects, investors are needed. These can only be obtained once the Power Trade Agreement is implemented (MoFA, 2016b, 2017a). Therefore, cooperation on large hydropower projects is made contingent on the agreement's implementation.

Nepal seems unconcerned about who it partners with to develop its hydropower potential. Statements have been issued targeted at China and India as well as the wider region. This is notable as traditionally, relations between Nepal and India have been based on the development of joint multipurpose projects and it was agreed that hydropower should be the 'topmost area' of partnership (MoFA, 2016c:10). Overtures to China (MoFA, 2017e) and the wider Asian region (MoFA, 2017f) indicate that Nepal does not consider itself bound by traditional loyalty or concerned about aggravating India vis-à-vis China.

Normative rhetoric from the dominant environmental and water management discourses is employed by Bangladesh and Nepal. Bangladesh has received significant donor aid in formulating its current water management approach. It is likely that the rhetoric of integrated water resources management (IWRM) and sustainability narratives are adopted due to these outside influences. The acknowledgement of its own vulnerability towards environmental disasters is also likely to incentivise action. This is evident in security language, such as 'crisis' and 'battle' in relation to the environment (MFA, 2016d). In other instances, Bangladesh frames infrastructure as the necessary solution to water issues. The need to 'harness' and construct barrages are presented as necessary, which employs the rhetoric of the hydraulic mission (MFA, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). Therefore, there appears to be tension between the discourses of IWRM, ecological modernisation and the traditionally dominant hydraulic mission.

Nepal also recognises that it is vulnerable to the risks of climate change. It frames itself as an unjust victim of climate change as, while it has 'no contribution to global warming', it will be 'disproportionately' impacted (MoFA, 2017a:19, 2017d:4). This presents climate change as an outside threat, one that contributing countries need to act against. This framing is often accompanied by the narrative linking hydropower to energy security and cooperation. Therefore, investing in Nepal's hydropower sector is the solution to the climate change victim problem frame. Nepal's national water strategy also contains climate change discourse as well as discourse of IWRM (WECS, 2002). The recognition of the global phenomena climate change and desire for holistic IWRM implies that Nepal may be more amenable to regional cooperation.

Bangladesh has long contested the bilateral nature of the basin and has often sought the involvement of Nepal to counter Indian dominance. Bangladesh repeatedly implores for holistic water sharing and initiatives at the regional scale (MFA, 2015, 2016a, 2016d). These include appeals for 'joint', 'basin-wide' and 'common' management of the rivers as well as reference to the South Asian region (MFA, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2016d).

Bangladesh is also working on initiatives that do not involve India. These include efforts towards tri-lateral water resources management cooperation with Nepal and Bhutan (MFA, 2014) and seeking investment from China in hydraulic infrastructure projects (MFA, 2016c). Bangladesh has also expressed interest in cooperating on hydropower and water resources with Bhutan on the Brahmaputra, which Bhutan has agreed with (BMFA, 2014, 2017). The two sides emphasised the advantage of sub-regional cooperation in power and water resources (BMFA, 2017). Similarly, Bangladesh and Nepal have discussed the need to strengthen cooperation in the energy sector and joint investment in Nepal's hydropower. As well as the development of hydropower, this would include greater grid

connectivity (MoFA, 2018). This may signal a move towards both Bangladesh and Nepal reducing dependency on India and countering Indian hydro-hegemony in the basin.

While Nepal and India have a history of water agreements and shared hydraulic projects, perceptions of mistrust persist. Nepal does not believe that India is adequately fulfilling its treaty obligations. As a result, bilateral discussions are protracted and problems persist with joint projects on the Nepalese side of the border (JSTC, 2013). Nepal's Foreign Minister has stated that Nepal needs to revisit its past treaties, questioning their position and relevance (MoFA, 2016d). This indicates dissatisfaction with the treaties and the belief that Nepal can advance its position.

Nepal has also joined China's Belt and Road, signing an MOU for cooperation in 2017. For Nepal, the initiative will 'relax the obstacles created by geography' and create 'alternative policy choices' for development through greater connectivity with China (MoFA, 2016e:27, 2017g:3). In June 2017, China and Nepal signed an MOU for the development of the Budhi Gandaki hydropower project. In November, it was said by the Deputy Prime Minister to be scrapped, as it was found to be 'irregular and thoughtless' (Lo & Zhou, 2017). China's Gezhouba Group responsible for the project considers the decision to be 'invalid', and the decision appears to have been reversed after Nepal's elections (Lo, 2017; BR Portal, 2018). In addition, the company has at least two other contracts in Nepal (Lo & Zhou, 2017), and it is reported that three Chinese companies will develop at least 1,000 MW of hydropower with Nepalese companies by 2020 (Xinhau, 2017).

India's response to increasing engagement between China and Nepal has been to reaffirm its own relations with Nepal, largely through the joint hydropower project. For example, efforts to complete the Indian backed Arun III hydropower project in Nepal have been increased (AFP, 2018) to counter Chinese projects. The project will eventually supply surplus power to India, with the aim of strengthening economic ties between the two countries. India has described its energy cooperation with Nepal as 'witnessing a new high' (MEA, 2017b). India has remained cold to China's Belt and Road, this includes refusing to participate in the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017. In a strongly worded statement, India stated its belief that connectivity initiatives needed to be based on 'universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality'. They should 'follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt ...; [provide] balanced ecological and environmental protection and preservation standards; transparent assessment of project costs'. Finally, '[c]onnectivity projects must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity' (MEA, 2017c:2). India is implicitly accusing the initiative of not conforming to these normative and commonly accepted standards. India's response also details a range of Indian-led initiatives for regional connectivity. These alternatives are stated to conform to the highlighted standards. This positions the Indian initiatives in opposition to China's, limiting areas for cooperation between the two.

The BBIN framework, which includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal, is one of the alternatives presented by India to the Belt and Road. Specific hydropower projects have been discussed under the framework (MEA, 2016b). Nepal has also indicated investment for its hydropower projects could be encouraged through the framework, which signals a more regional focus for its projects (MoFA, 2016b). However, the discourse in this area is vague with no details. Also, no concrete action concerning transboundary rivers has been undertaken so it is difficult to ascertain the willingness of countries to contribute through the forum.

Another potential avenue for growing multilateral cooperation is inland waterways. Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan have agreements to use the sub-regions inland waterways for bilateral,

multilateral and international trade. India and Bangladesh's Protocol on Inland Waterways Trade and Transit was renewed in 2015. It is suggested that more ports should be included under the framework and to develop the whole protocol routes with international Least Assured Depth standards (MEA, 2017d). Trade and navigation narratives involving inland waterways appear to be less common in the regions transboundary water discourse. As such, it is likely to be less politically charged. This is despite further developments being able to alter the geography of transboundary rivers through the construction of ports, storage dams and dredging.

From the Chinese side, the government positions the Belt and Road as an economic entity by using economic and cooperative framing. The Belt and Road policy document upholds that the initiative is to promote 'national economic prosperity, regional economic cooperation, and development', and it is an 'ambitious economic vision of opening-up and cooperation' (NDRC, 2015). Similarly, the Minister of Foreign Affairs employed an economic narrative by holding that the Belt and Road 'seeks to strengthen economic collaboration, improve connectivity, promote trade and investment, promote currency conversion, and bolster people to people exchange' (Eyler, 2015). The Belt and Road is also frequently described using cooperative discourse. This includes rhetoric such as 'inclusiveness', 'mutual cooperation', 'coordination' and an emphasis on integration (NDRC, 2015). The promotion of economic integration and cooperation by China acts to deflect from potential geopolitical goals of the strategy.

Discussion

The Ganges basin encompasses an abundance of interests, institutions and interactions. Historical enmity pervades into modern relations, which results in mistrust and an absence of effective multilateral river basin institutions. Power asymmetries are influential in what riparian countries can achieve and the traditional bilateralism of the basin is being challenged. Hydraulic infrastructure is prominent in relations and can serve as a vehicle for ostensible cooperation or fuel tensions and disputes.

India's geographic position and hegemonic role often place it at the centre of transboundary water interactions. India's preference for bilateral relations remains evident through its pursuit of bilateral agreements and projects. These mainly concern the joint construction of hydraulic infrastructure projects, which has become a sanctioned discourse between states. Narratives to inspire urgency are frequently employed in its dealings with Nepal and Bangladesh, although with different intents. With Bangladesh, India is potentially actively stalling progress on matters such as the Teesta Agreement through pacifying Bangladesh that the matter is being resolved. This allows India to continue its unhindered use of the river and narrows negotiations, preventing new actors or solutions from becoming involved.

With Nepal, India employs urgency narratives to push for joint hydraulic infrastructure development. This glosses over past and ongoing issues with shared projects through securitising the need for the further projects, which moves them up the political agenda (Buzan *et al.*, 1998). Narratives emphasising the benefits that the project will deliver to Nepal often accompanies this securitisation, which alludes to Nepali economic dependence on India. Conversely, Nepali concerns regarding the implementation of its treaties with India are kept at the technical level. As such, they are outside what can be discussed at higher political levels. The technical nature of discussions may prevent issues regarding equitable allocation of water, traditionally a sticking point within Indian–Nepalese relations, being discussed, as it does not fall into the technical discourse.

Despite India's discursive efforts, Nepal and Bangladesh may be moving away from bilateral relations with India over the Ganges. Bangladesh is pushing for regionalism through appeals for basin-wide management and framing transboundary rivers as 'commons'. It adopts the globally sanctioned discourse of IWRM to increase this argument's legitimacy and normative value (Molle, 2008). Nepal is seeking to open up foreign investment in its hydropower sector and is targeting a range of investors. It has MOUs with China under the Belt and Road strategy and is discussing the issue with Bangladesh. This is a move away from India being Nepal's traditional investor in hydropower.

There also appears to be an increase in regional initiatives featuring different configurations of states. Bangladesh and Nepal both refer to cooperation on a regional scale. Trilateral accords between India, Bangladesh and Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Bhutan and Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan are referenced in the discourse. However, these have not been convincingly taken up by the discourse or yielded notable results.

More significant is the BBIN framework initiative, which seeks to increase connectivity and trade between the participating nations. This positions it as an alternative to the Belt and Road strategy in South Asia. Water resources management, power, inland waterways navigation and hydropower development fall under the BBIN.

If actively and effectively implemented, the BBIN could fulfil Bangladesh's desires for basin-wide management. This is as it spans from Nepal and Bhutan, where the Ganges–Brahmaputra River system originate, through to the delta in Bangladesh and so provide transboundary water cooperation for the whole larger river system. While the BBIN provides a potential multilateral platform for the countries to discuss and coordinate transboundary issues, it is worth noting that India is the strongest country within the framework. While the other countries may be able to form a bloc to exert pressure on India, the initiative may continue to perpetuate Indian dominance.

Additionally, bilateral and multilateral relationships that do not include India are entering the discourse. The introduction of Chinese finances and expertise provides an alternative to cooperation with India. This allows the other basin countries to reduce their dependence on India and can bolster relationships with China and each other. The geography of the region makes it questionable how successful these initiatives can be without India's cooperation. They may be designed to bring India to the table by potentially forming a bloc to exert pressure.

Despite these outcomes, India's official discourse does not reflect a desire for multilateral cooperation. In contrast to the other basin countries, in the context of the Ganges, India does not refer to the region or sub-region outside of the BBIN framework. Rather, the focus is still on the benefits that either side will gain from the bilateral cooperation. Therefore, it is uncertain if there truly is a move towards multilateral cooperation. It is questionable how much power India is willing to give up through participating in regional institutions when bilateral interactions are embedded within the basin.

China's encroaching influence in South Asia is shifting power configurations in the region. In particular, India's historic position as the basin's hegemon is being challenged. The Belt and Road strategy is spreading Chinese influence through what India considers its backyard. Hydropower developments are geopolitically significant as strategic expression of power and ability (Richards, 2002; Molle, 2009; Williams, 2019c). This may contribute to their popularity and perseverance in the discourse. Both India and China have a strong resource base and so could be asserting their dominance and tying the weaker states to them. This is done through visible demonstrations that national energy, and so economy is dependent on hydraulic infrastructure supported by India or China (Williams, 2018).

Growing Chinese influence in Nepal appears to be making India increasingly uneasy. Nepal has long been considered by India as a buffer against China, and the two have close trade and economic relations. As such, Nepal's involvement in the Belt and Road brings China to India's border and threatens the Nepali–Indian preferential relations. Nepal's dissatisfaction with its transboundary agreements with India (Salman & Uprety, 2002) makes China an attractive alternative for developing transboundary water projects (Murton *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, this can impact water flows to India. So far, Indian response has been to fast track its own projects with Nepal, including the Indian backed Arun III hydro-power project, in a bid to reaffirm its influence (AFP 2018). The Arun III project is the first of five planned projects, two of which are backed by China, to be inaugurated in Nepal (SCMP, 2018).

Increasing Chinese influence in South Asia may shed light on India's willingness to form and participate in regional multilateral institution, such as the BBIN, which runs counter to its favoured bilateral stance. India's statement regarding its refusal to participate in the Belt and Road forum may be significant in signalling India's new willingness for multilateral regional engagement. India is positioning such initiatives as counter to the Belt and Road, with itself in a dominant role.

Conclusions

The Ganges basin is found to be dominated by entrenched bilateralism, originating mainly from India and perpetuated within institutions. Discourse is being used strategically, mostly by India, in an attempt to maintain the bilateral nature of the basin. However, challenges to India's hegemonic position in the basin have resulted in more multilateral discourse emerging. As such, the basin is no longer 'static' (Zeitoun *et al.*, 2016), and the mistrust in riparian relations noted by authors such as Hanasz (2017) and Mirumachi (2013, 2015) is becoming more evident through shifting discourses in the basin.

Multilateral discourse is emerging on two fronts, the first as a challenge by the other basin states to Indian dominance. Dissatisfaction among the weaker states is apparent in references to their dependence on India, desire to accelerate certain projects, mistrust and perceptions of vulnerability or frustrations at delays. This has led to an increase in discourse advocating multilateralism, particularly from Bangladesh. As the most downstream country on the Ganges, Bangladesh is particularly vulnerable to developments upstream. The only agreement in place, the Ganges Treaty is imperfect and has a limited purview. Therefore, Bangladesh strongly advocates basin-wide management of the Ganges, which will open up a discussion on national projects, such as India's National River Linking Project, or upstream bilateral agreements, such as Indian–Nepali hydropower developments. As a result, Bangladesh will become a legitimate actor within the discourse, which will strengthen its arguments to protect its downstream water rights.

While effective multilateral mechanisms are struggling to make an impact, following Den Bestin *et al.* (2014), the increase in discourse may be the first stages of widening of the discursive-institutional spiral. This is evident in new actors and initiatives being able to enter the discussion. Attempts to institutionalise multilateralism in transboundary interactions occur through references to the need to use, support and operationalise multilateral initiatives. However, it is unclear if the degree of institutionalisation required to usurp bilateralism will be achieved.

Perhaps, the greatest recent challenge to the discourse and entrenched bilateralism is China. The Belt and Road strategy represents a battle ground for strategic influence between the region's two hegemon. The Belt and Road challenges India's bilateral approach, undermines its influence in the basin and interferes with the achievement of its hydraulic mission. Therefore, business-as-usual may no longer be

considered viable by India, and the discourse may become more multilateral. Depending on how India proceeds, such a shift to multilateralism could be the start of more genuine and holistic management for the Ganges.

However, it is questionable that increasing Chinese influence will shift the sanctioned discourse on water management. This is as hydropower is prominent within the BBIN framework and is in Sino–Nepal interactions under the Belt and Road. As such, the hydraulic mission discourse prevails with the hydraulic infrastructure narrative being sanctioned and underscoring cooperation. Securitising discourse is used to further such projects. The majority of institutions are technical, responsible for implementing projects or the exchange data. As such, power remains with states with very little devolved to institutions. A shift towards greater allowance for multilateralism, with or without China, may not impact the privileged narratives of the hydraulic mission. This can be seen in basins such as the Mekong, where China's increasing involvement is causing an increase in hydropower projects and further drive to utilise all the river's available resources (Williams, 2020b).

Therefore, the hydraulic mission is at the centre of the discursive-institutional spiral as the dominant approach to transboundary water. Narratives and issues outside of the spiral are only entertained when they can be used to further and strengthen the hydraulic mission and are co-opted for this purpose. Bilateralism appears to be a favoured approach to furthering the Indian hydraulic mission and is embedded into the discursive and institutional context, but it is being challenged. This contests the basin's power balance rather than challenging the dominance of the hydraulic mission.

As a result, relations over the Ganges in South Asia appear set for a geopolitical battle. Corridors under the Belt and Road such as the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar corridor rely on India's participation to be successful. However, the extension of Chinese influence into what India considers its backyard is met with hostility. Hydropower developments, particularly in Nepal, are becoming a visible demonstration of the two hegemons competing for geopolitical influence. This could have negative implications for communities downstream in both India and in Bangladesh. Vying for strategic influence and heightened discourse are unlikely to create a thaw in Indian–Chinese relations. This may impede China's wider geopolitical objectives under the Belt and Road and could increase regional tensions.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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