

WATER DIPLOMACY BETWEEN INDIA AND BANGLADESH IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: OVERCOMING THE LIMITS OF STATE SOVEREIGNTY

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Abstract

One of the thorniest issues in India-Bangladesh relations is the fair and equitable share of common rivers. Except for the 1996 Ganges Water Sharing Treaty these two countries have not made much progress in resolving water disputes. Narrow understanding of national interest and mutual hostility and suspicion are mostly responsible for such a grim reality. Bangladesh's repeated efforts to revive South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and involve other co-riparian countries in the region to offset the power asymmetry in its relations with India have not produced desired results. This article advocates a three pronged diplomatic strategy for Bangladesh to overcome the constraints of state sovereignty and open new windows of opportunity for water negotiation. The central argument revolves around the importance of involving all relevant actors and stakeholders in resolving the disputes. Indian Constitution bestows considerable amount of autonomy to the state governments in terms of making resource related decisions. So following the logic of para-diplomacy the article argues that Bangladesh should change its Delhi centered diplomatic strategy and engage more with relevant state governments in India in order to achieve mutually beneficial results. Such sub-national level interaction over a sensitive issue like water requires a stable and cooperative environment. Here comes the second tenet of the article, Track II diplomacy. It is suggested here that socialization of elites from both sides of the border should be actively promoted to create an enabling environment for integrative water negotiation. The last aspect of the strategy focuses on the involvement of non-governmental organizations in the region to produce objective and independent assessment of the present water (in)security situation and build public opinion that can lead to informed negotiations. If harnessed properly, the information power and networking skills of these organizations could be vital in setting agenda and implementing policy prescriptions.

Introduction

One of the greatest irritant in India-Bangladesh relations is the fair and equitable share of common rivers. The 1996 Ganges Water Sharing Treaty has been hailed by some as a milestone in solving water dispute between these two

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countries. The fact remains that even after nearly 17 years of signing the Treaty, these countries could not move any further in resolving disputes over other common rivers vitally important for the lives and livelihoods of people on both sides of the border. The reasons behind such a grim situation are securitization of water issues in both countries, India's insistence on bilateralism, inconsistency in Bangladeshi foreign policy due to regime change, mutual suspicion and mistrust, and the culture of blame game in the greater South Asian region. Since its independence Bangladesh has been trying to involve the international community to offset the power asymmetry in its relations with India while negotiating over common rivers. Repeated efforts on Bangladesh's part to revive South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in this regard and involve all co-riparian countries sharing international rivers in the region have hit a brick wall. Concessions from India have often come too little and too late.

This paper will critically discuss how the application of para-diplomacy in the age of globalization might help Bangladesh in breaking this state level deadlock situation. The central argument will revolve around the importance of bringing influential non-state actors like the state governments of India, relevant non-governmental organizations and social elites of both countries on board. Since Indian constitution bestows certain degree of autonomy to the state governments in terms of making natural resource-related decisions, the paper will argue that Bangladesh should change its Delhi cantered diplomatic strategy and engage with relevant sub-national actors in India in order to achieve mutually beneficial results. At the same time, to get rid of the fear psychosis and culture of mutual suspicion and mistrust, people to people interactions should be encouraged. Building a conducive and enabling environment for integrative bargaining over a politicized issue like water takes time and effort. Investing into Track II diplomacy and facilitating socialization between elites from both sides of the border is expected to create cooperative framework for negotiation between India and Bangladesh. Involving relevant non-governmental organizations from both India and Bangladesh as well as other riparian countries might help producing objective and independent assessment of the present water (in)security situation and also build necessary public opinion. Such a development would ultimately assist well informed discussion between the state and sub-national actors. The paper will be based on the premise of revolution in diplomatic arena in the recent years that has bolstered the influence of non-state actors. It will try to explain how these non-state actors can help overcome the constraints of state sovereignty and open new windows of opportunity for bi and multilateral cooperation.

This paper is divided into several sections. The first section discusses emerging theories and concepts of diplomacy that privileges sub-national and non state actors at local, regional and global levels. How forces of globalization

have created incentives for states to use these non-traditional actors in resolving long standing international disputes and build cooperative frameworks is discussed at length at this stage. The next section gives a brief history of the bumpy relations between India and Bangladesh over water issues. The aim is to identify the central points of disagreements over shared water resources. This section also points out the shortcomings of the nature and substance of existing water negotiation framework between these countries. The following section elaborates on how the onset of coalition politics in India has tilted the balance of power between the centre and the states in favour of the latter. The way this qualitative change in India's electoral politics is influencing its foreign policy decisions is critically analyzed. Bangladesh's options in this changed context regarding water diplomacy are discussed in the next two sections. The analysis in this section builds on the evidence of successful para-diplomacy in other regions of the world and existing structure of informal, sub-national and transnational cooperation between India and Bangladesh. The paper argues that Bangladesh needs a smart combination of immediate, medium and long term strategies to soften up relevant state governments in India, use the potentials offered by non-state actors and break the ice between social elites on both sides of the border. The article will sum up with reiterating the central points made throughout the paper.

Diplomacy in an Era of Globalization: Concepts and Applications

The origin of diplomacy is marked by public and private communications among different political entities since the beginning of history. Mingus observes that in the contemporary world, 'Interactions across national boundaries are now thought to be highly complex and includes an enlarged cast of characters, including nation-states, sub-national governments, quasi-governmental organizations, and an array of private and non-profit organizations. Whereas astute politicians and diplomats might always have been in close contact with this enlarged cast, the newer view is that this enlarged cast is directly involved in cross-border relationships today and may even undermine the traditional approach to international relations and the sovereignty of nations.'¹

Today diplomacy is longer confined to the realm of sovereign state practice. Thanks to the forces of globalization and revolution in information technology, non-state actors at both transnational and sub-national levels are exerting considerable influence over issues and areas traditionally considered as state business. The information revolution has changed the playing field, often in

1 Matthew S. Mingus, "Transnationalism and Subnational Diplomacy: Are Governance Networks Perforating Sovereignty?" *International Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 29, no. 8, 2006, p. 578.