



# Drumbeats from a hawk

Water: Asia's New Battleground

By Brahma Chellaney

HarperCollins Publishers India, 2011, Noida, 386 pp., Rs 699

ISBN 978-93-5029-161-0

DIPAK GYAWALI

In 1994, at the height of the *Fifty Years Is Enough Campaign* by global NGOs against foreign aid agencies in general and the World Bank in particular, the USAID ran a full-page advertisement in the newspapers targeted to the members of the US Congress. It argued that the budget of aid agencies should not be cut because almost all of aid money came back to the US in the form of consultant remunerations and the sales of US goods abroad. It never occurred to them that NGOs too would be reading that advertisement and using it subsequently as perfect proof of why the aid agencies should be disbanded. It similarly does not seem to have occurred to Brahma Chellaney, who enjoys a reputation in international security circles as the pampered prince of Indian security hawks, that his book would be read by people who do not subscribe to his worldview and who would therefore find its contents of perverse value to hit back at India's water policy makers, much to their embarrassment.

At first glance, *Water: Asia's New Battleground* looks impressive. It was first published in the US by Georgetown University Press, a name that always draws the notice of those in Strategic Studies circles. It has seven chapters with over 130 annotated endnotes each. The first chapter lays out the challenge as the author sees it of the rising economic growth of Asia, its changing geo-strategic importance and its morphing into a flashpoint for water wars. Chapter Two discusses the "securitisation" of water from Central Asia to China, painting a picture of China's success in the enterprise and contrasting it with India's failure. Chapter Three is about the Tibetan plateau and about the supposed Chinese plans to divert the waters therein to its arid north-east. Chapter Four is about the author's fears about the Brahmaputra and its possible diversion by China. Chapter Five looks at water disputes within countries such as those in Central Asia, Pakistan, India, China and Korea; and while Chapter Six is meant to describe conflicts between countries, and although it does look briefly at Israel-Palestine as well as Central Asia, it is primarily focused on China and its riparian neighbours. Chapter Seven tries to summarise the arguments of the previous chapters and puts forth Chellaney's views of what needs to be done, although no theoretical underpinning or linkages to everything said before is spelled out.

The problem starts with the scope of the book itself: any knowledgeable reader familiar with water will

start feeling apprehensive from the Preface itself where Brahma Chellaney audaciously claims it "comprehensively covers the whole of Asia". The region east of the Urals and the Suez right up to the Pacific is traditionally lumped as Asia only because European history saw it as the 'other' and knew no better. The continent-sized regions within Asia such as South, Southeast or West 'Asias' as well as China have their own hydro-ecological specificities and political economic histories that go with them. These are as, or even more, different than those of West Europe or North America. The nature of water conflicts therein are so context-specific, they have been difficult to generalise: Chellaney's attempts to lump them together do not succeed either. The core of the book is in Chapters Three, Four

and Six dealing with Tibet and the Yarlung/Brahmaputra rivers and the author's Sinophobic lens through which he looks at them. The other chapters are selective compilations of questionable 'facts' and debatable issues to justify his overall paranoia in these chapters.

Let us first deal with the regions peripheral to the core of the book that this reviewer has close familiarity with. The entire section on the Mekong is painted as China versus the rest, with China as the villain recklessly building dams upstream to the detriment of downstream riparians and refusing to join the Mekong River Commission (MRC) because of the obligation as member to give prior notification before building dams on the mainstream. The truth of the matter is that the MRC was a Euro-American creation

during the Cold and Vietnam Wars designed to keep the "pariah" states of China and Burma out. Till this year, all its chief executives have been Europeans, and the Southeast Asians are only now talking of indigenising it but have been unable to put the Vietnam-Thailand rivalry aside. A China excluded at the outset can hardly be blamed for going it alone; and it was only in 1995, after many of China's upstream developments were well underway that the lower four decided they needed to bring China in. A re-vamped Mekong treaty was done that year with China coming in as an observer and dialogue partner; and it has been sharing flood and dry season data without compromising what it perceives as its own national interests. Moreover, there are, besides the MRC, other vibrant regional Mekong water forums of businesses, academics, NGOs and even governments where China is a full and active partner. Chellaney is blithely oblivious to all this.

For a book by an Indian strategist, the treatment on the Ganges is amazing for what Chellaney leaves out with convenient amnesia. The Gandak and Kosi treaties with Nepal that have bedevilled India's water relations with its upper riparian neighbour (from which it receives up to 70 per cent of the dry season flow of the Ganges) is barely mentioned and not discussed at all. The Tanakpur agreement and the subsequent the Mahakali treaty between Nepal and India receives just a page of attention with all the facts of project size, irrigation benefits and even projects and agreement sequences all wrong. (Tanakpur was NOT constructed in 1998 by India but between 1984 and 1987, and certainly not under the terms of the 1991 agreement!)

The Mahakali treaty has remained in limbo for 14 years since its signing and ratification in 1996, even though the treaty promised in writing that the studies concerning the Pancheshwar high dam would be completed in six months and the dam itself built in eight years. The treaty further stipulates that it would be reviewed "in ten years or earlier"; and since that time has lapsed by four years already, the Mahakali treaty is essentially dead and festering for lack of decent burial, a strategic concern to India one would think that is as important as any. But it does not seem to be within the attention realm of the author. He goes along with the conventional Indian hydrocratic thinking that praises the Bhutan model and bemoans the sad state Nepal is in. In doing so, he not only ignores the role played by India in the regime change brought about in 2006 as well as by the water treaties with Nepal such as the Mahakali in contributing to the political instability in Nepal. He also fails to see the changing nature of the hydropower debate in Bhutan itself that is facing power cuts amidst plenty, and is belatedly shocked with its own grandiose plans that would essentially drown out the only agricultural valleys it has as well as the culturally important *dzonkhas* therein.

The section on the Indus would be expected to be one where Chellaney vents his views with gusto, and he does not disappoint. He does admit that the Indus treaty is not a water sharing

**This book does a great disservice to India's water scholars and hydrocrats who advocate better cooperation with India's riparian neighbours against the background of existing faulty treaties. Chellaney's chutzpah berating China for being unilateralist and not signing treaties with its riparian neighbours – "unlike India" – will undoubtedly have the Chinese readers writhing in fits of laughter**

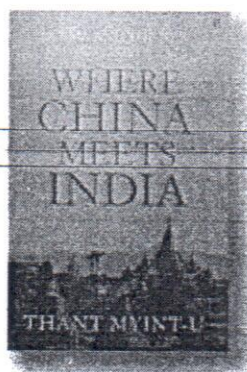


KUNAL VERMA / KALEIDOSCOPIA

treaty but one that, subsequent to the partition of British India, partitions the rivers as a corollary and absolves the signatories of any need for subsequent cooperation beyond minimal. It has been characterised by other scholars as a divorce settlement. What Chellaney does in this book is to try and provoke the Indian establishment into challenging that settlement afresh as unfair. It certainly would open a can of worms, not the least by the upper riparian Kashmiris on both sides of the volatile line of control. This is because, as with the Nile basin, the Indus treaty is one that is heavily biased against the upstream highlands and in favour of the downstream plains in both the Indian and Pakistani Punjab. It also favours irrigation withdrawals against river and estuary ecology. Indeed, within Pakistan this has been a bone of contention between the populous west Punjab and the even more downstream Sindh; and Chellaney, is not above stoking that conflict. He argues for India using the Indira Gandhi (Rajasthan) canal to release Indus waters directly to Sindh via India and to "force Pakistan's hands to renegotiate the terms of the treaty". He thinks this plan would only have high international diplomatic costs: one wonders how he plans to carry India's own states of Haryana and Punjab along who don't even want to do this between themselves currently under existing arrangements!

The chapters on Tibet and Yarlung/Brahmaputra constitute the core of the book and bring to full blossom all of Chellaney's fears as a lower riparian. For a Nepali or a Bangladeshi water expert reading these pages, it can be akin to an out-of-body experience. He or she cannot help replacing 'China' with the word 'India' in every other page and not asking Chellaney: "Hey, but that is exactly what India did to us!" The hydraulic science behind his arguments is dubious at best. Yes, the Yarlung Tsangpo traverses the entire long length of the northern Himalaya, but Tibet is a cold desert and studies so far show that its watershed contributes no more than some 14 per cent of the overall flow of the river. Even if the Chinese did withdraw all of that – an engineering feat so difficult if not impossible and so economically senseless – its impact on Assam and Bangladesh would not be anywhere near the apocalypse painted by the author.

This book does a great disservice to India's water scholars and hydrocrats who advocate better cooperation with India's riparian neighbours against the background of existing faulty treaties. Given India's current difficulties with Pakistan on the upstream dams in Kashmir, with Nepal on border inundation and treaties in limbo, with Bangladesh on many other rivers such as the Teesta, Chellaney's chutzpah berating China for being unilateralist and not signing treaties with its riparian neighbours – "unlike India" which though strictly bilateralist he paints as a multilateralist – will undoubtedly have the Chinese readers writhing in fits of laughter. The sooner wise Indian owls, to say nothing of the doves, distance themselves from the views in this excessively hawkish book, the easier will their lives be in the difficult water negotiations ahead. ■



**T**hant Myint-U demonstrates immaculate scholarship and fine word craft in his book *Where China Meets India*. It is a very readable history of a largely neglected and obscure part of Asia and is interspersed with some perceptive insights into the current political and economic dynamics sweeping across a fascinating region encompassing China's Yunnan province, India's Northeast and Myanmar's northern arc of ethnic minorities. The destinies of these different components have been closely intertwined. This is as much a factor of geography as it is of a shared history and cultural and linguistic affinities. There has been a constant ebb and flow of multiple ethnicities that even now resist their integration into nationalist narratives of the major states of China, India and Myanmar. And nowhere is the nationalist narrative as overbearing and even ruthless as it is in China.

In his chapter entitled, "The Malacca Dilemma", Thant Myint - U recounts the history of China's first emperor, Qin Shihuangdi, who in the 3rd century BC defeated and occupied the powerful Shu kingdom (present-day Sichuan) using a clever ruse. This bears quoting in extensor since it is at once a historical allegory and a modern-day parable:

...he [the Qin emperor] had his men construct statues of cows made of stone and placed them in an area of Qin where he knew visiting Shu ambassadors would see them. He also had blocks of gold placed near the statues, so it would seem (said the Chinese annals) that the cows were excreting gold. The plan worked. The ruler of Shu soon heard of the golden cowpats and requested that he be sent a few of these miraculous cows. Hui Wen [the Qin emperor] replied that he would be happy to present them as a gift but that he would first need to build a special road through the mountains, as the cows were delicate and needed to be transported with care. The Shu ruler accepted. The result was the "Stone Cattle Road", an amazing feat of early engineering, with huge wooden blocks laid of great vertical beams, bored straight in to the mountainside. As soon as the road was completed, the Qin launched their invasion and permanently annexed the land of Shu.

This is an early lesson in the importance of infrastructure and logistics which the Chinese have learnt well. The integration of the

# Roads to Mandalay

Where China Meets India: Burma and the New

Crossroads of Asia

By Thant Myint - U

Faber & Faber, London, 358 pp., Rs 699

ISBN 978-0-571-23963-4

SHYAM SARAN

vast triangle south of Yunnan is being driven by the construction of roads, railways and pipelines. In this case, however, the gold is already beginning to flow to China in the form of oil, gas, raw materials and timber.

Thant Myint - U unravels the tragedy of the several ethnic groups, sometimes straddling across national boundaries, plunged into turmoil and conflict in the relentless surge of modern economic development and rampant and corroding consumerism. This is exacerbated by the predatory advances of powerful states demanding both conformity as well as acquiescence. At another level he examines the impact on India and China as the old buffers provided by impenetrable jungles and hostile tribal communities, also disappear as new highways, railways and pipelines penetrate and lay bare a hitherto forbidden and forbidding zone. In this respect, China is way ahead of India establishing early dominance over this now contested region. It has displayed an energy, confidence and single-mindedness that seem alien to the Indian temperament. India's effort to provide at least a countervailing presence to China in Myanmar, for example, has been half-hearted and notoriously time consuming. If China is to meet India in Myanmar, chances are that this would be right at our frontier with the latter.

When Thant Myint - U and I met for the first time several years ago, there was one thing on which we agreed immediately: the Western policy of isolating Myanmar and imposing sanctions on it had proved to be counter-productive and ineffectual. They had opened the door for China to establish a commanding presence in the country despite the fact the Myanmar generals were generally pro-West and would have preferred to have a more diversified set of relationships. With borders open to China, India and Thailand the sanctions would not work in any case. In 1997, Myanmar joined ASEAN and later the sub-regional grouping, BIMSTEC, (this at India's urging) mainly with the aim of reducing its dependence on China. When I arrived in Yangon the same year to take up my assignment as Ambassador, I was struck how the senior generals were wary of China's presence in their country and kept urging India to raise its profile in the country. We were able to establish a fairly decent defence relationship with the country despite Chinese threats to the Myanmar side. In 2001, India was the only country other than China,

to be allowed a consulate in Mandalay. Here, too, the Myanmar government resisted Chinese attempts to scuttle this move. India did build the 107 km-long Tamu-Kalay highway in western Myanmar, but that has been the last major project to be completed. Others have been languishing in the so-called pipeline for years. It is not surprising that Thant Myint - U gives low marks to India on delivery.

Thant Myint - U sees a bright future for Myanmar as a cross-roads country between India and China. There are visions of the country benefitting from the high voltage growth in the two giant economies of Asia and in serving as the channel for trade and transportation between India's Northeast and southern China. This could happen. It is already happening but mostly on an informal basis. Cheap Chinese plastic goods, moulded furniture, synthetic blankets and footwear from across the Myanmar border are already flooding markets in our Northeast driving out all possible competition. There is not much evidence of any reverse traffic from India to either Myanmar or southern China. Given the density of transport arteries being created on the Chinese side and running deep through Myanmar, this is not surprising. As Thant Myint - U points out, the links between India's Northeast and the rest of the country remain abysmal.

Thant Myint - U wrote his book before the significant changes taking place in Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi, the charismatic leader is now free and may even stand for one of the by-elections. China has been snubbed on the construction of several major dams on the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy and it seems that at long last Western countries may drop all sanctions against Myanmar. This will at least give the rulers in the country some breathing space, but it is unlikely that China's dominant status in the economy will change in a hurry.

Thant Myint - U is impressed by China's achievements and disappointed by India's seeming apathy. One cannot blame him. In fact, he has been somewhat gentle in his reproach. He has a higher comfort level with India and considerable anxiety over China's relentless march across the region. In this he reflects a sentiment common throughout Southeast Asia. This presents a window of opportunity to India to expand its own room for strategic manoeuvre and help other countries in the region do the same. If only our leaders in Delhi were not so deeply preoccupied with mostly self-inflicted constraints at home. ■