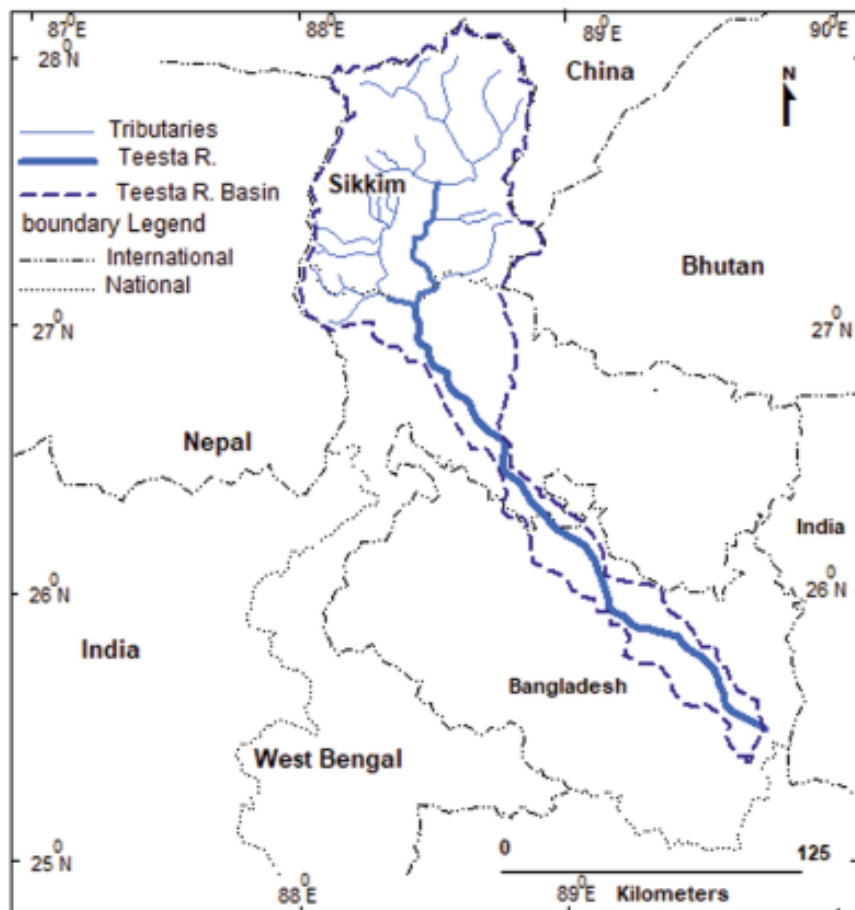




The Teesta Tango: A Delicate Dance of Power, Politics, and Persuasion

BY
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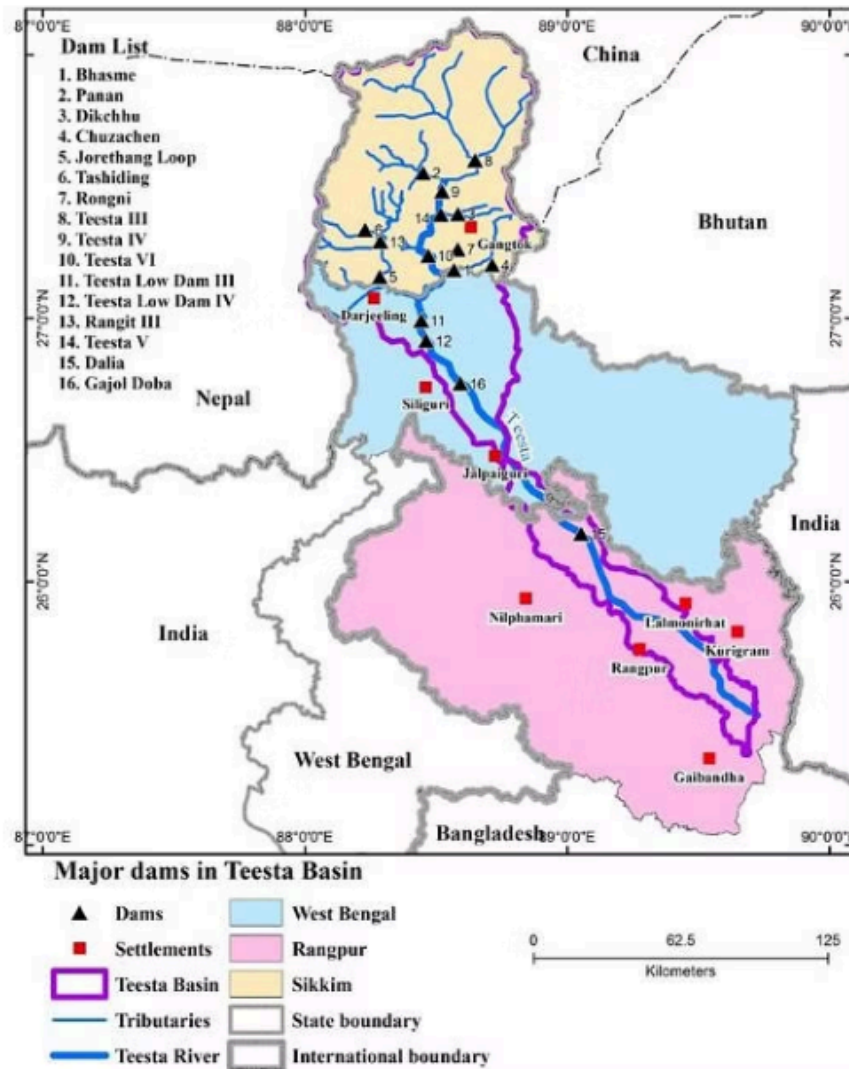


(Source: [Resource Management, Sustainable Development and Governance](#))

The Teesta River, one of the major rivers in the northeastern part of the Indian subcontinent, originates in the Himalaya, in the Tso Lhamo Lake in the northern state of Sikkim, India, at an altitude of about 5,330 meters.

During its approximately 414-kilometer (258 mile) journey, the river flows first through Sikkim for about 151 kilometers (94 miles), through deep gorges and valleys where it is fed by numerous glaciers and small tributaries, significantly increasing its volume. It then traverses India's West Bengal state through the districts of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Jalpaiguri, for about 142 kilometers (88 miles). It then enters Bangladesh through the Rangpur Division in the northern part of the country. After a 121-kilometer (75 mile) run it joins the Brahmaputra River on its right bank at Phulchhari Upazila; from there the river is known as the Jamuna. This river collective eventually merges with the river Padma west of Dhaka, and then flows into the Bay of Bengal.

In West Bengal, the Teesta River is regulated by two significant barrages: the Gajoldoba Barrage and the Teesta Barrage. The Gajoldoba Barrage, constructed in 1985, is primarily for irrigation purposes, serving the agricultural needs of northern West Bengal. The barrage has created a reservoir that has become a popular tourist spot, attracting visitors for bird watching and its scenic beauty. It also plays a crucial role in regional connectivity, linking the Doars and Terai areas of North Bengal. The Teesta Barrage, located in the state's Jalpaiguri district, is a significant structure for irrigation and water management in the region.



(Source: [The Daily Star](#))

The Teesta Barrage is a part of the larger Teesta Barrage Project, and serves multiple purposes, including irrigation, flood control, and water management. These barrages are integral to maximizing the utilization of the Teesta River's waters for various uses in West Bengal, particularly for agriculture. The management of these barrages has significant implications for water-sharing agreements between India and Bangladesh, as they directly influence the flow and availability of water downstream in Bangladesh.

Featuring India, Bangladesh, and recently even China, the Teesta River issue affects millions of lives dependent on its waters and tests the diplomatic and strategic balances in the region. It is now the stage for a geopolitical tango in South Asia.

Tug of War

First, a bit of backstory.

Bangladesh has been seeking a fair share of the Teesta's waters for several years. In July 1983, an interim agreement was reached regarding the sharing of the Teesta River's waters; interim, pending the completion of scientific studies. It was agreed in a spirit of friendship and good neighbourliness that an ad hoc sharing of the Teesta flows during the dry season will be done.

This ad-hoc arrangement allocated 39% of Teesta's flow to India and 36% to Bangladesh. The remaining 25% was left unallocated, pending further discussions and studies to better understand the river's flow and needs. The ad hoc sharing would be valid till 1985 end.¹ However, the agreement was not implemented.

That led to several high-level political meetings and discussions, and in 2010, during the 37th meeting of the Joint Rivers Commission at the ministerial level, Bangladesh and India decided to sign an agreement on Teesta water sharing by 2011. For that purpose, a draft agreement was exchanged. A glimmer of hope appeared with a promising accord that proposed a split of the actual flow available at Gajoldoba Barrage in West Bengal, stipulating 37.5% for Bangladesh and 42.5% for India while the remaining 20% was intended to be reserved for environmental flow and other ecological purposes to maintain the river's health and ensure sustainable water management.

According to the draft agreement, the Indian share of the Teesta water would be made available at Gajoldoba, while the Bangladeshi share would be at Teesta Barrage (Doani in Bangladesh). The draft agreement dealt with the period of flow between the 1st of October to 30th of April which is commonly referred to as the lean period or the dry season. The signing of the agreement on Teesta waters was one of the objectives during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh in September 2011 for bilateral meetings with Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina.

It was stalled by unexpected political objections as Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, claimed that water was a State Subject under the Indian Constitution, and the state needed to give its consent to the central government before any agreement with Bangladesh. Thus, the negotiations on the draft Teesta agreement failed to fructify and the treaty has remained unsigned by the parties ever since.

During the G-20 summit in 2023, in New Delhi, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attended the conference as a special guest of India. A bilateral meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was held at the conference on September 10. Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen had earlier mentioned that the Teesta water-sharing agreement would be discussed in that meeting.

Moreover, there are 54 common river issues between India and Bangladesh. Of these, the 30-year agreement of the Ganga Water Treaty will expire in 2026. The Joint River Commission also wanted to discuss these issues. While there is movement on renegotiating the Ganga Water Treaty, equitable sharing of Teesta waters remains a long-standing unresolved issue between Bangladesh and India.

1. <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/bi-17927.pdf>

Enter the Dragon

In a plot twist, China has strategically swept in with an offer Bangladesh might find hard to refuse: A major infrastructure project on the Teesta – complete with a shiny new barrage and improved river management to control erosion among other things, improved irrigation, and enhanced farm productivity.

China has long been interested in Bangladesh's Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project, which is estimated to cost upwards of \$1 billion. Beijing announced its intent to carry out this project in end-2023; an agreement is expected to be negotiated, if not signed, during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to China in July 2024.

This proposal is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), their gigantic plan to enhance their connectivity with the world and expand their influence, especially across Asia. The Teesta River is a part of BRI's vast Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC). The BCIM-EC is a proposed economic corridor that plans to connect China's southwestern province of Yunnan to India's eastern state of West Bengal via Bangladesh and Myanmar.



(Source: [13 Angle](#))

If Bangladesh goes through with China, it would bring China's footprint close to the so-called "Chicken's Neck" region, also known as the Siliguri Corridor. This is of great strategic significance. The Chicken's Neck is a narrow stretch of land in India that connects the northeastern states to the rest of the country, and it is also close to the Tibet Autonomous Region. This geopolitical sensitivity adds to the complexity of regional dynamics involving India, China, and Bangladesh.

For Bangladesh, this is like being handed a lifeline because this is indeed a lucrative opportunity that could boost the economy and resolve the water woes in northern Bangladesh. However, there's no such thing as a free lunch. Accepting China's help means cozying up to the dragon, and accepting Chinese loans with a risk of debt overburden.

India's Defensive Countermoves

At any rate, China's moves with the Teesta Basin have India sweating bullets. India, always wary of China's motives, sees this proposal as a potential Trojan horse. Increased Chinese presence near this vulnerable strip is akin to inviting a lion into the henhouse aka a direct threat to India's security interests.

The issue of the Teesta River resurfaced during India's Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra's two-day visit to Bangladesh over May 8-9, 2024. Before his visit, an influential Indian daily, *The Hindu*², reported that China's involvement in Bangladesh's Teesta project was a matter of concern for India.

This visit marked the first official trip to Bangladesh since the formation of the new government in Bangladesh in January 2024. The visit highlighted the fact that India's failure to finalize the Teesta water-sharing agreement had heightened Dhaka's impatience regarding the future of river-related initiatives. It appears that a major objective of Secretary Kwatra's trip to Dhaka was to dissuade Bangladesh from pursuing China's Teesta-related project. During the visit, Secretary Kwatra proposed Indian funding for the Teesta project. The suggestion was aimed at nudging Bangladesh away from China's proposal.

Irrespective of the outcome of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to China, India is unlikely to sit and watch quietly.

Essentially, India has offered to fund the Teesta River project, by sidestepping the long-awaited Teesta water-sharing treaty that would ensure a fair water distribution to Dhaka. This only points towards the geopolitical corridors: India's counteroffer is a calculated maneuver to block Chinese involvement, echoing the strategic moves seen in the Sonadia project (a deep sea port project in the Bay of Bengal near Cox's Bazar that had caught China's keen interest, but Bangladesh canceled it after being influenced by India's unease over Beijing's expanding footprint in such a strategically vital area of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean Region).

This isn't just about water; by proposing financial support, it seems like India aims to outmaneuver China, reaffirm its influence in the region, and maintain a critical foothold in South Asia's intricate balance of power along with preventing China from getting too friendly with Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's Balancing Act

Caught in the middle of this high-stakes game, now Bangladesh must perform a delicate diplomatic walk. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina needs to juggle the tantalizing economic benefits from China against the longstanding relationship with India.

While Bangladesh and India have touted their relationship as reaching the highest level of friendship over the past decade and a half, the Teesta River water-sharing issue has remained a persistent thorn in their side. India's prolonged failure to address this matter has left Bangladesh increasingly impatient regarding the fate of river-related initiatives since 2011 when India's then-Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, backed away due to objections from West Bengal's chief minister, Mamata Banerjee. Despite repeated pledges to finalize the deal in subsequent bilateral meetings, India has yet to follow through, leaving Bangladesh in a state of limbo.

2. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/the-hindu-explains-what-does-chinese-interest-in-the-teesta-mean-for-india/article32420205.ece>

While maintaining neutrality remains a cornerstone of Bangladesh's foreign policy, the Teesta project presents a conundrum, potentially forcing Bangladesh into a delicate balancing act or risking the ire of crucial allies. Courting India could strengthen bilateral ties and address immediate security concerns, yet befriending China may promise economic prosperity. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina faces a tough call wondering if India can truly fill China's shoes in the project, given its red tape, sluggish funding, and technological limitations in relation to China.

A false step could place Bangladesh in an awkward position with one or both of its giant neighbours. A plausible way for India to keep China away from the Teesta Basin could be to sign the Teesta Treaty, which would provide Bangladesh the political capital with which to engage India's help with rejuvenating the Teesta Basin over and above the sharing of water.

Bangladesh's approach so far has been one of careful diplomacy, aiming to keep both the giants happy while securing its interests. This strategy underscores Bangladesh's desire to stay sovereign and not become a pawn in this regional chess game.

The Ripple Effect

The resolution of the Teesta water-sharing dispute will ripple far beyond the riverbanks. It's a litmus test for regional power dynamics and could set the tone for Bangladesh's future interactions involving China and India. Equally, proper water management for the people of Bangladesh and the political economy should be the top priority in terms of making a decision regarding the Teesta project in Bangladesh. In this drama of epic proportions, the Teesta River stands as a symbol of the intricate and ever-evolving geopolitical dynamics in South Asia.

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