

***Water: Asia's New Battleground.* By Brahma Chellaney. Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2011. Hardback: 386pp.**

At a time when there is much debate about the respective roles and strengths of China and the United States in Asia, a new book discussing the extent to which China is in a position to exercise control over Asia's freshwater resources focuses attention on the quip attributed to Mark Twain that "Whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting over."

It is not necessary to take Twain's quip to its logical conclusion to accept the important role that freshwater plays in international relations. And this is so despite the fact that, overall, it is arguable whether too much emphasis is placed on the negative aspects of disputes arising from the existence of the many trans-boundary rivers in the world. Indeed, research on 263 trans-boundary rivers carried out by Oregon State University some years ago concluded that there was much more cooperation than conflict in their management. But the same research concluded that conflict did arise in particular circumstances, notably in acutely dry regions of the world (for a summary of this research see <<http://www.economist.com/node/11293778>>).

Nevertheless, in South and continental Southeast Asia, and despite the notable instance of the Indus Waters Treaty between India and Pakistan, factors other than climate have resulted in a failure to achieve successful approaches to problems arising from the existence of trans-boundary rivers. As will be apparent to some readers of this review, the present writer's principal concern is with the management, or rather lack of it, of the Mekong as an international river that passes through or by no fewer than six countries — China, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam and to a lesser extent with developments on the Salween which flows out of China into Myanmar. In this book Brahma Chellaney undertakes the much more ambitious task of looking at international rivers on a pan-Asian basis.

Written with a fine sense for acerbic commentary on the political misjudgements of his own country's politicians, including in relation to the Indus Waters Treaty — "Nehru's long seventeen years in office stood out for not learning from mistakes and continuing to operate on ingenuous premises" (p. 79) — the key fact that pervades his book is the extent to which China's administration of Tibet means that it has the capability to control all the major rivers flowing from

that region into South and Southeast Asia. As the author puts it, “the Tibetan Plateau is Asia’s ‘Water Tower’” (p. 97), the location of the sources of the Yangtze, the Mekong, the Salween and, most importantly the Brahmaputra, which flows into both India and Bangladesh.

By its dam-building programme on the Mekong, China has already shown the extent to which it has no intention of treating that river as other than a natural resource over which it has unlimited sovereignty. Beyond this fact, and, to quote Brahma Chellaney (p. 130): “The Chinese hydroengineering projects on the plateau [including consideration to diverting water to northern China from the Brahmaputra] have a direct bearing on the quantity and quality of riverwater flows to southern and southeastern Asian countries” and “China has already damned every major river on the Tibetan Plateau — including the Mekong, the Salween, the Brahmaputra, the Yangtze, the Yellow, the Indus, the Sutlej, the Shweli and the Karnali.”

Chellaney’s conclusion that China’s activities in Tibet pose the threat of interstate water conflict (p. 297) may seem extreme, and very clearly reflects concerns linked to Indian interests. But what has already happened with the Mekong is a salutary qualification to any suggestion that he is overstating the potential consequences of Chinese actions and intentions. In the Mekong’s case it is not even necessary to attribute malign intentions to China’s actions in building its dams to acknowledge their long-term threat to the river’s existing flow pattern and its capacity to act as a vital resource for food and agriculture for the wider region. So far, the downstream Mekong countries have not been prepared to challenge China’s actions given their relative strengths. But can the same be said about India in the future? For the moment, all that can be said with certainty is that China’s control of Tibet means that it is in a dominant, even unchallengeable position so far as the control of much of Asia’s water resources is concerned.

This is a valuable contribution to a subject that still receives too little attention when power politics are discussed. Of notable value, and beyond the descriptive narrative contained in the book is the author’s discussion in Chapter 4 of the possibilities and limitations of customary international law in relation to the control of freshwater resources.

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