

Theorizing South Asian Hydropolitics: Interdependence, Identity or Power?

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Abstract

This paper analyses the hydropolitics of South Asia from the perspectives of liberalism (interdependence), constructivism (identity) and realism (power). It argues that the numerous South Asian water treaties across the Indus-Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basins and the religion-driven partition of the basins in 1947 and its fallout, make the respective (neo)liberal and constructivist perspectives appear relevant. However, like the regional international politics, South Asian hydropolitics too lends itself better to (neo)realist explanations. The (balance of) power-centered regional security overflow to the realm of water and makes water competition an integral part of the larger competitive and scarce security of South Asia.

Keywords: *Hydropolitics, India, Power, South Asia, Theory; Water.*

Introduction

Theoretically, the international politics of South Asia is mired in the neo-neo version of the so-called 'First Great Debate' of International Relations (IR). The (neo)liberal theoreticians of the region of South Asia point out the regional progression towards democracy, free trade and multilateralism under South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as enough omen of a regional cooperative security. The (neo)realist theoreticians on the other hand challenge (neo)liberals and argue that the nature of South Asian security is competitive and scarce which makes the stated liberal trends temporary. They point out the arms race between India and Pakistan, the mutual trust deficits amongst almost all the South Asian states, widespread territorial disputes, large numbers of intra-regional trade barriers and the repeated reversal of the regional democracies to non-democracies as innate traits of the power-centred security of the region. Interestingly, the religion-driven partition of India in 1947, and the strong identity dimension of the contemporary regional disputes add constructivist perspective as a strong contender to the aforementioned 'South Asian neo-neo inter-theoretical debate'. These three perspectives of liberalism, constructivism and realism are engaged in inter-theoretical competition with one another in interpreting contemporary international politics of South Asia.

In the realm of international hydro-politics of the region, the wide range of literature available have no explicit theoretical underpinnings. Moreover, majority of the hydro-political studies which have explicit theoretical expressions are conducted in the context of 'Water War Thesis'. On one hand, such studies are inclined towards the 'water induced cooperation' liberal school of thought due to the presence of many water treaties across the mighty rivers of South Asia; the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna. On the other hand, these studies are mainly limited to India-Pakistan hydro-politics to the neglect of overall regional hydro-politics. In order to fill this gap, this paper extends the liberal-realist-constructivist debate commonly engaged in South Asian international politics to the regional international hydro-politics in a comparative and competing fashion.

This paper is broadly divided into three sections. Each section first briefly introduces the relevant premises of the respective theoretical tradition, apply the same to regional international politics followed by a detailed discussion of the hydro-politics of the region. Section one provides insight into the liberal interpretations of the hydro-politics of the region. Section two discusses the hydro-politics of the region from the perspective of constructivism. Section three is comparatively detailed and is based on realist interpretation of the regional hydro-politics. This section argues that realism represented by power supersedes in its explanatory abilities over liberalism represented by interdependence and constructivism represented by identity in the realm of hydro-politics as well.

Interdependence and the bridges over waters

Liberalism interprets international relations in terms of interdependence and operates under the principle of reciprocity. Classical liberalism believes in democracy, free trade and collective security as agents for international change and peace. International regimes, a neoliberal perspective, believes international anarchy could be tamed through regimes. (Burchill et al., 2005, pp. 55-83). As discussed above, in the domain of international politics, the liberal theoreticians of South Asia looked for those aspects of regional politics which confirmed to the mentioned liberal perspectives. Such explanations focussed on regional progress towards democratization-confirming to republican liberalism, freed trade-confirming to commercial liberalism, collective security under the United Nations Organization (UNO) or SAARC-confirming to liberal institutionalism and certain cooperative regional agreements-confirming to neoliberalism.

The regional interdependence, cooperation and peace the regional states registered were cited enough evidences for the regional (neo) liberals to claim 'The End of History' in the region of South Asia as well. This regional liberal progression towards peace and change included SAARC's agreement of South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), and other multilateral approaches towards tackling non-traditional security threats of terrorism, diseases and climate change (Chakma, 2009). In addition, the post-Cold War regional leap towards democratization which included Pakistan's democratic spells of 1990s, Bangladesh's and other regional states' embrace of republicanism; and most importantly, the 'inside-out' pacifist effects of democracies on the foreign policies of the respective states towards another fellow democracy were pointed out as tendencies understandable only through employing the liberal perspectives. The India-Pakistan Lahore Declaration of 1999 and the India-Bangladesh Ganges Waters Treaty of 1996 were cited such effects of the stated liberal 'inside-out' effects.

In the realm of hydro-politics, the fact that the South Asian rivers of the Indus, Brahmaputra, Ganges and Meghna flow through many state boundaries augments liberal tradition. Not only these rivers bound the states of the region into a common unity and destiny, but the waters of these mighty rivers induced cooperation amongst co-riparians of the region of South Asia. Such insights stood in conformity with the findings offered by anti-water war thesis analysis (Mehsud & Khan, 2019). One such analysts was Undala Zafar Alam, who took inspiration from liberal perspectives and modified the same to give her own perspective of 'water rationality' (Alam, 2002). While applying the 'water rationality' perspective on the Indus, she found that despite mutual political animosities, the two riparians of India and Pakistan

cooperated on water question which confirmed 'the water induce cooperation' argument of the liberal church.

In the aftermath of the partition of India, India and Pakistan signed the Standstill Agreement in December 1947 to maintain status quo on the waters of the Indus for three months. With the expiry of the agreement, another agreement called the Delhi Agreement, was signed on 4 May 1948 (Inter-Dominion Agreement, 1948). Soon afterwards, fresh negotiations ensued under the umbrella of a multilateral institution, the World Bank. These mediations succeeded and the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) came into being in 1960 between India, Pakistan and the World Bank. The IWT qualified for the neoliberal perspective of 'international regime' which argues that anarchic relations between states can be tamed into sustainable cooperation through international institutions and regimes (Burchill et al., 2005, pp. 64-65).

In order to sustain peace across the Indus, the IWT regime established the Permanent Indus Commission (PIC) and a detailed dispute resolution mechanism. The treaty also provided for sharing of data, mutual visits and cooperative development of the Indus. Such mechanisms further qualified the IWT for the stated neoliberal perspective of international regimes, which stressed that cooperation could be and should be institutionalized. The resilience of the Indus regime was put to test when different water sharing issues emerged between India and Pakistan like the disputes over Salal, Wullar, Baglihar, and Kishanganga projects. However, the dispute resolution mechanism of the regime resolved all the disputes amicably. Over a period of time, the Indus regime developed a life of its own and has served as a model regime for regional riparians (Cohen, 2005). Inspired from the IWT, different water experts suggested either to expand the same regime or to erect another water regime on the patterns of the Indus regime on river Kabul to avoid Pak-Afghan potential water feuds.

Similar peace water induced on the Ganges between the co-riparians of India and Bangladesh. After establishing Joint River Commission in 1972, numerous rounds of negotiations resulted in the Ganges Waters Treaty of 1996. The commission also succeeded in reaching several ad hoc agreements on another India-Bangladesh shared river, Teesta, in 1983, 1996 and 1998. All these treaties bridged the disputed rivers and established cooperation on waters despite mutual political differences. The Ganges Water Treaty in particular won liberals' applaud as the treaty had the attributes of an international regime, as were observed in the Indus water regime. This treaty too institutionalized peace by providing a detailed dispute resolution mechanism and other cooperative arrangements in the treaty.

Equally praised was the cooperation India and Nepal achieved over water sharing. Despite cold political relations, both the riparians cooperated on the water question and established several water regimes on the shared rivers. These water regimes included the Kosi Treaty of 1954, the Gandak Agreement of 1959, and the Mahakali Treaty of 1996. These treaties too qualified for the international regime perspective especially the Mahakali Treaty as it established the Mahakali Water Commission to institutionalize the peace it established. Moreover, Nepal-Bhutan joint hydel generation is particularly projected by liberals as ideal form of South Asian water cooperation (Williams, 2018).

Mixing identity and water

Constructivism interprets and operates under the principle of identity. It values normative or ideational structures of ideas, ideology, norms, history, culture, and identities in shaping international relations. As such, it focusses on the origin and genesis of interests whereas liberalism and realism focus on how to achieve these interests (Burchill et al., 2005, pp. 197-203). This article found the constructivist perspective highly rigorous, and relevant to the international politics of South Asia as compared not only to the preceding neo-liberal set of theoreticians but to constructivist theoreticians at global level as well. It was for a number of reasons.

First, the religion-based partition of India in 1947 made such a perspective highly laudable. The religious and historical differences between Hindus and Muslims shaped the identities of the two communities into

two differing concepts of nationalism. These different concepts of nationalism, i.e. secular Indian nationalism and Islamic Pakistani nationalism (The Two Nation Theory) resulted in the partition of India and the creation of two independent states of India and Pakistan respectively (Sridharan, 2005). In addition, it was this India-Pakistan differing identities, histories and religions which determined their contemporary disputes. Second, regional constructivists paint other border issues like the Durand Line issue between Pakistan and Afghanistan and India-Bangladesh border problems in terms of identity. In case of India-Bangladesh relations, the same differing Hindu-Muslim identity which has resulted in the partition of India on the Bengal's side is projected as the cause of lack of cordiality between the two neighbours. In case of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, the Durand Line dispute is projected as rooted in Afghanistan's historic irredentism, which necessarily is an identity driven phenomenon.

Third, for many South Asian theoreticians, the Kashmir dispute is a clash of irreconcilable identities of an Islamic Pakistan, a secular India and distinct Kashmiri identity of Kashmiriyat. Last, in addition to the inter-state disputes, majority of South Asian intra-state disputes are also projected in non-material perspectives. Such disputes included the Sri Lankan civil war between Sinhalese and Tamils, the Khalistan Movement of greater Punjab in India, and two dozen other secessionist movements raging across South Asia.

Analysing hydro-politics of South Asia through the same constructivist lenses, one finds an identity dimension to regional water relations as well. The religious base partition of India also partitioned the Indus basin between India and West Pakistan and Ganges and Brahmaputra basins between India and East Pakistan in 1947. The same post-partition identities of an Islamic Pakistan (both East and West Pakistan) and a secular India shaped the material resources of the rivers of the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra into disputation between India and Pakistan. In case of the Indus, the repeated failures of post-partition water negotiations owed much to the stated stark different identities. Since constructivists argue that states with differing identities tends to fight one another, therefore, it also implies that the more the identity differences between states the more the dispute intense. When the World Bank intervened to resolve the dispute on the basis of the functional approach (Lilienthal, 1951; Black, 1951), politics and water were separated. For constructivist school, the functional approach separated water from the mutually antagonistic India-Pakistan identities, histories, and ideologies and such separation resulted in the IWT in 1960. The treaty worked well for the first four decades but when the same differing identities revisited the Indus question, the IWT was propelled to stress and strain.

Constructivist perspective assigns the same identity differences to be the main cause for the failure of India-Pakistan and later India-Bangladesh (after 1971) water negotiations on the Ganges and Brahmaputra as well. The same identity laden irredentist claim of Afghanistan over the territories of Pakistan holds water in the case of Pakistan-Afghan water crisis as well. However, constructivism greatly fails to account for India-Bhutan exemplary cooperation and India-Nepal lack of cooperation in the domain of hydro-politics despite the fact that Bhutan is a Buddhist whereas Nepal is Hindu state.¹ It is here where realism comes to fore to explain the stated conflict-cooperation paradox in the cases of India-Bhutan and India-Nepal specifically, and South Asian hydro-politics in general.

Power flows through rivers in South Asia

Realism interprets international relations in terms of power and operates under the principle of authority. It believes in international politics as an amoral struggle for power under anarchy. It states that anarchy breeds security dilemma, which results in security-oriented self-help with balance of power as a necessary recipe for stability (Burchill et al., 2005, pp. 33-38). In the sphere of international politics, the South Asian realist theoreticians argue that in the volatile region of South Asian it is the realist paradigm that still reigns

¹ Religion constitutes one of the main factors of state identity in South Asia.

supreme in its explanatory prowess. Such vehemence of the regional realist theoreticians for the rigour, and relevance of the realist perspectives is based on three reasons.

First, they argue that realism might have suffered setback due to its failure to explain the fall of Soviet Union or other global outcomes at global level, but the Machiavellian and Hobbesian state of South Asian security apparatus could be best understood through realist explanations. Security in South Asia, they argue, is scarce, competitive and power oriented. Such a security was manifested in the case of India and Pakistan by the three major wars of 1948, 1965, 1971, border skirmishes, atomic explosions of 1998, the Kargil crisis of 1999, the 2002 military stand-off, and the proxy war of Kashmir since 1990 (Chakma, 2009). Both the states are in a continuous state of cold war with weekly clashes across the Line of Control (LoC) making both the states trapped to an enduring rivalry (Ganguly, 2002). In the case of India and Bangladesh, both the states are at odds with one another over the Chittagong Hill dispute, the issue of immigration and Farakha water dispute. Similar political tensions prevail between Pakistan and Afghanistan, India and Nepal and India and Sri Lanka, which proves to the scarcity of security in South Asia.

Second, the regional realist theoreticians engage liberalism and constructivism successfully. The region of South Asia, according to realists, saw no “Liberal Moment” (Gleditsch, 2008) even after the end of the Cold War. The claims liberals put forward in the context of global economic and regional integrations of the states of South Asia under SAARC and SAFTA are questioned by pinpointing the walls of tariffs, quotas, and mutual trade embargoes. Such regional mercantilist tendencies are not only due to the competitive nature of the security of the region but due to the competitive economies of the regional states. Democracy and its peace inducing ‘inside-out’ effects in the region are challenged on the grounds that India fought wars with Pakistan and has failed to subsidize tensions with Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka irrespective of the domestic composition or the leader heading the respective states. Indian penchant for bilateralism in its dealing with its neighbours as against the liberals’ favoured multilateralism adds into the questions realist pose for the liberal group of theoreticians.

Equally convincing critique realists offer against the explanations of the constructivist perspective. For the regional realists, the South Asian disputes are not due to the identity, or any other ideational aspect but the material and strategic aspects that made the disputes intractable. They assign material value even to intra-state disputes. The Tamils, for instance, invoked their Tamil identity only when Sinhalese denied them their due share in the resources of the state. The same argument goes for Khalistan, where identity was invoked only when Punjab was denied its due share in resources, and other secessionist movements and disputes as well.

Third, this set of realists put forward explanations to the regional political dynamics in the (neo)realist perspective. They argue that it is the international anarchic political system coupled with regional power asymmetry that determine the political outcomes between the regional states. The preponderance of India in terms of regional distribution of power resulted in mutual security dilemmas which determines contemporary regional political frictions. The comparatively less powerful states, for instance Bhutan, follows the strategy of bandwagon which confirms to the (neo)realist logic (Burchill et al., 2005, pp. 33-38). Weak states shy away from following a balancing strategy in the face of a regional hegemon and resorts to cooperative interactions as could be seen in India-Bhutan political cordiality. On the other hand, powerful states, for instance Pakistan (Rajagopalan, 1999), and to some extent Bangladesh, resort to the strategy of balance of power to thwart hegemonic tendencies. Indian efforts to offset Pakistan’s or Bangladesh’s regional balancing through preference of bilateralism over multilateralism (under SAARC or UNO), resulted in a competitive security apparatus of the region of South Asia.

Realism offers its own explanations of the hydropolitics of South Asia as well. These realist insights question the liberal and constructivists perspectives on one side and offers distinct theoretical explanations to the hydropolitics of the region, on the other. In case of the hydropolitics of the Indus, realists argue that the post-partition bilateral arrangements failed due to the intense India Pakistan security dilemma. In order

to offset Indian hydro-hegemony, Pakistan sought external balancing by seeking help from the US, who had already sought Pakistan's help in the US-USSR Cold War context. The Cold War dynamics compelled the US to offer the good offices of the World Bank to India and Pakistan and resolve the Indus dispute. The Indus mediations protracted as long as Pakistan was ruled by democracy. However, the same Cold War compulsions coupled with military power in Pakistan, goaded the Indus mediations (1951-1960) to succeed in 1960 (Hussain, 2018).

The very nature of the IWT in itself is a manifestation of realpolitik, self-help, sovereignty and contending India-Pakistan water (in)securities. Instead of creating the ideal joint management, or other cooperative arrangement, the treaty divided the six rivers of the Indus quantitatively, leaving nothing in between the two riparians to be cooperated. Such a divisive nature of the IWT exhibited the (neo)realist much stressed systemic pressures. On one hand, the India-Pakistan security dilemma and on the other, the Cold War contestations made the treaty "a *partitioning* treaty, a coda to the partitioning of the land" (Iyer, 2005). Such a partitioning nature makes the IWT a badge of (neo) realism instead of (neo) liberalism.

The political leaders and parties that signed the IWT were termed as traitors and the treaty a sell-out, an instrument of treachery by the people of both the riparians. While responding to such a criticism, the then president of Pakistan, Ayyub Khan, who was signatory to the treaty from Pakistan stated that:

We have been able to get the best that was possible...very often the best is the enemy of the good and in this case we have accepted the good after careful and realistic appreciation of our entire overall situation... the basis of this agreement is realism and pragmatism. (Ali, 2008, p.170).

Moreover, since 1990s India is constructing new projects on the three western rivers: the rivers which were allotted to Pakistan by the IWT. Out of these Indian projects, 67 are objected by Pakistan (Khalid, 2010). Pakistan claimed these projects against the letter and spirit of the IWT whereas India refused any non-conformity of the projects with the treaty. Most of the objections levelled by Pakistani side were of strategic nature. Pakistan finds these Indian projects on the western rivers a threat to its national security as the central focus of its objections are against the existence and locations of gated spillways. Pakistan argues that the gated structures, often located at the bottom of the projects, give India power over the control of the waters of the rivers allotted to Pakistan. Such a control gives India a strategic edge vis-à-vis Pakistan. Using water as a weapon, India can control over downstream manoeuvrability of Pakistani troops which could render the famous defence canals across Sialkot- Lahore sector defenceless against any Indian invasion (Sharif, 2008). Similarly, such water storage structures could damage Pakistan's agro-based economy as well (Thapliyal, 1999). India, time and again, assures Pakistan of no such strategic intensions. However, Pakistan sees herself strategically vulnerable vis-à-vis India being armed with the weapon of water.

In case of Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions over river Kabul which flows from Afghanistan to Pakistan, Pakistan perceives an Indian hand in Afghanistan's upstream exploitation of river Kabul. It considers Indian help to Afghan government in its drive for construction of dams on river Kabul an extension of Indian water hegemony from Kashmir to Kabul (Bakshi & Trivedi, 2011). A recent study elaborated Pakistan's perception against Indian assistance to the Afghan government as follows:

The increasing Indian involvement in Afghanistan is seen by Pakistan as a threat to its national security. The Kabul is an important tributary of Indus which contributes 20–28 MAF to the river flows. The supplied water is indispensable for fulfilling water demands of Khyber–Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. (Qamar, Azmat & Claps 2019, p. 6).

In case of India-Bangladesh hydropolitics, Indian penchant for bilateralism and ad hoc approach to resolve water tensions speak volume for the relevance of realist perspectives. When India operationalized the Farakha barrage over Ganges in 1975, Bangladesh registered a complaint with the UN General Assembly. The Assembly asked both the states to resolve the dispute and the Ganges Water Agreement was reached in 1977. The agreement was for five years and subsequently two Memorandums of Understanding were

signed in 1982, and in 1985 between India and Bangladesh, each for two years. However, from 1988 onwards both the riparian failed to reach another agreement and the upstream India withdrew water from the Ganges unilaterally (Sood & Mathukumalli, 2011). Bangladesh complained Indian unilateral withdrawal of the waters to the Commonwealth Summit in 1993 and again to the UN General Assembly in 1995.

The famous Ganges Waters Treaty of 1996, which is to expire in 2026, had also asked both the riparian to reach agreement on the rest of 53 rivers India and Bangladesh share (Upreti & Salman, 2011). However, no substantial progress is made on any of the stated river except river Teesta where India once again resorted to the same bilateral and temporary approach. Following an ad hoc agreement in 1983, further agreements were reached in 1996, and 1998 over Teesta but Bangladesh remained unhappy with the implementation of the agreements by India (Scott, 2019). In 2004, Bangladesh changed its stance on the later treaty of 1998 which represented Bangladesh downstream anxieties vis a vis Indian upstream hydro-behavior. In addition, Bangladesh expressed displeasure with the National River Linking Project India had announced in 2002 and the Tipaimukh Dam as well. A recent study conducted in the context of Tipaimukh Dam suggested India and Bangladesh to shun the 'sovereignty-based approach' and adopt an approach based on 'cooperative security', one (Huda, 2017).

In the case of India-Nepal water bridges the three treaties built, realism points out the India-Nepal water tensions (Scott, 2019). Nepal's unhappiness with India-Nepal aforementioned treaties could be witnessed in Nepal's insistence on the revision of the treaties. Consequently, the Gandak treaty was revised in 1964 and the Kashi treaty in 1966 but Nepal still wants to revise the treaties to its favor. Moreover, Nepal is also unhappy with the Mahakali treaty as well whose ambiguity is a source of Nepal's hydro-apprehensions (Upreti & Salman, 2011).

While countering constructivist arguments, realism suggests equal failure of constructivism to account for the India-Bhutan hydel cooperation and India-Nepal water tensions in the realm of hydro-politics as well. Moreover, in case of India-Pakistan hydro-politics, realism suggests that the provinces of Sindh and Punjab and the princely states of Bahawalpur, Bikaner and Khairpur were at loggerheads over water distribution in united India as well. Those states and provinces had no distinct religious differences as they were all part of the same British Indian Empire with mix Hindu-Muslim population. With the partition of India, those intra-British empire became international between the newly born states of India and Pakistan. Interestingly, the intra-state water disputes between Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan in India and between Punjab, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces in Pakistan could have an identity dimension as sub-nationalists in both the federations invoke identity politics. Such a role of identity is especially noteworthy in the Khalistan movement in India. However, it was water resource distribution that served as one of the factors to trigger the identity-based secessionist Khalistan movement (Mustafa, 2007), and not the other way around. Similarly, for realism, water resource distribution served as one of the factors to shape the Sindhi or Pashtun sub-nationalist sentiments in the case of Pakistan.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the hydro-politics of South Asia from the perspectives of (neo) liberalism, constructivism and (neo) realism. It argued that the patterns of theoretical underpinnings of regional hydro-politics were in conformity with the theoretical application in South Asian international politics. In the realm of politics, the (neo) liberal tradition seemed relevant to explain different post-Cold War economic and political transformation in the region of South Asia. It argued that the nature of regional security was cooperative. Constructivism too found its advocates due the dominant role of religion in the partition of India. However, (neo) realism superseded liberalism and constructivism in explaining the underlying factors behind South Asian security. Such a dominance of (neo) realism owed much to the regional (im) balance of power in which India enjoyed predominant position as compared to other regional states. This imbalance of power bred security dilemma between India and its smaller neighbours.

In the domain of regional hydro-politics, the existence of numerous water treaties over South Asian rivers appealed for explanations offered by (neo) liberalism. Counting mainly on these regional water treaties, different liberal theoretical strands highlighted the interdependence such treaties established over rivers. Moreover, the role of religion, identity and other non-material structures in shaping regional security and its spill over effects to the domain of hydro-politics also made constructivist perspective appealing. However, the regional (im) balance of power had its implications for South Asian water distribution as well. In the case of Indus, the intense India-Pakistan mutual hydro-vulnerabilities, trust deficit and security dilemma had its toll on the nature of the IWT. The security dilemma not only resulted in establishing a partitioning treaty but had its toll for the future performance of the treaty as well. Moreover, Pakistan also found Indian assistance to Afghan hydro-ventures on river Kabul an effort to subject it to a hydro-strategic crunch. In the case of India-Bangladesh, and India-Nepal water relations, both the riparians resented India hydro-behaviour which was based on a bilateral and temporary approach to water apportionment. Interestingly, the India-Bhutan hydel cooperation also confirmed to the (neo)realist logic which states that smaller state resort to bandwagon in the face of a regional hegemon as compared to bigger states which resort to balance.

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