

The Role of Tibet's Transboundary Water Resources in the US-China Rivalry

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Abstract

At the World Water Week organized in Stockholm in August 2023, the US Department of State expressed concerns about Beijing's large-scale water diversion projects and hydropower schemes in Tibet. In response, China's state-controlled Global Times accused Washington of colluding with the "Dalai Lama clique" and fabricating "rumors and smears" that "have no scientific basis." This episode gives us an insight into the possible growth of tensions between Beijing and Washington over freshwater resources in the context of the global climate change and the intensification of Sino-American rivalry. Against this backdrop, this article examines the official narratives of Beijing and Washington with respect to transboundary rivers originating in the China-controlled Tibet, which are a lifeline for the downstream countries of South and Southeast Asia. As a result, the paper maps out hydro-political complexities linked to China's water leverage over the lower riparian countries. Finally, it draws a range of future scenarios for the unfolding international tensions arising from water-sharing practices.

Key words: China, India, Tibet, the United States, water

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Introduction

In light of global population growth and ongoing climate change, access to fresh, clean, and safe water is becoming an increasingly challenging issue in many parts of the world. During the United Nations Water Conference, held at the UN Headquarters in New York in March 2023, the international body alarmed that “water scarcity and the potential for conflicts between countries over resources increase.”¹ In other words, drinkable water is not only the key to the day-to-day survival of humans—it is also potentially a subject of both internal and international tensions, disputes, and even open conflicts.

In August 2023, the participants of the World Water Week organized in Stockholm discussed the water politics of Asia's hydrological giant—the People's Republic of China (PRC). Commenting on the challenges of water security in the Himalayan region, US Under Secretary Uzra Zeya addressed the “dramatically increased large-scale water diversion projects and hydropower development across the Tibetan Plateau.”² Zeya noted that the ambitious projects of the Chinese government in Tibet—which has been controlled by Beijing since 1950—have been implemented without any input from six million Tibetans and resulted in displacement of traditional mountain communities. According to Zeya, Beijing's actions have also had—and will continue to have—highly negative implications for other countries located on the banks of transboundary rivers that originate in Tibet. Finally, the Under Secretary warned that “reduced access to fresh water for a region of 1.8 billion people will have drastic environmental, economic, and societal consequences.”³

In response to the address of the US State Department representative, the Global Times—an English-language platform under the auspices of the People's Daily, the

¹ “UN Water Conference: Reducing Cross-Border Tensions” (2023/3/24), visited date: 2024/3/27, *UN News*, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/03/1135002>.

² “Under Secretary Zeya's Remarks on Addressing Water Security Challenges in the Himalayan Region” (2023/8/24), visited date: 2024/4/20, *U.S. Department of State*, <https://www.state.gov/under-secretary-zeyas-remarks-on-addressing-water-security-challenges-in-the-himalayan-region/>.

³ “Under Secretary Zeya's Remarks on Addressing Water Security Challenges in the Himalayan Region”.

flagship newspaper of the Communist Party of China (CPC)—published a lengthy article. In addition to defending the Chinese government by presenting its water activities on the Tibetan Plateau as responsible and cooperative, the article also claimed that “the US State Department colluded with the Dalai Lama clique to attack and smear China’s water resources development and utilization on the Northwest China’s Qinghai-Xizang (Tibet) Plateau.”⁴ It further argued that the “rhetoric of the West and the Dalai Lama clique is completely unscientific and fabricated.”⁵

This example demonstrates that the problem of water management in Tibet is not limited to environmental concerns; in fact, control over Tibetan water resources is a political—and highly politicized—matter in both the national and international security dimensions. Therefore, using the Stockholm conference discussion as the main case study, this article examines connections, overlaps, and contradictions between the political narratives of Beijing and Washington.

The paper is divided into several sections. First, it presents an overview of China’s control over the Tibetan water resources and development projects, with the main stress on Beijing’s river dam constructions. Second, it analyzes the official position and narratives of the two actors: the Chinese government and the Washington administration, with the emphasis on Donald Trump and Joe Biden’s presidential terms. Third, it compares the political narratives of these two actors in the context of geopolitical complexities, territorial disputes, political and ideological aspects of the status of Tibet, and the ongoing rivalry between China and the United States. Finally, the study draws possible scenarios for the growing tensions and potential clashes over water resources in light of those dynamics.

⁴ “Why Do the US and Dalai Lama Clique Smear China’s Dam Operation and Water Resources Development on Qinghai-Xizang Plateau?” (2023/10/9), visited date: 2024/4/20, 《Global Times》, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202310/1299528.shtml>.

⁵ “Why Do the US and Dalai Lama Clique Smear China’s Dam Operation and Water Resources Development on Qinghai-Xizang Plateau?”.

China's Hydrological Projects in Tibet

With the control over most of the Tibetan Plateau, the PRC seems to be a hydrologically “privileged” state, or even a “hydro-hegemon.”⁶ The scarcely populated Tibet is much more than just a rocky, windy, and largely uninhabitable landmass—in fact, the “roof of the world” is one of the main sources of freshwater on Earth. Because of its glaciers, lakes, and rivers, Tibet has metaphorically been called the “Third Pole”—indeed, it is the third largest area of frozen water after the North and South Poles.⁷

The Tibetan Plateau is the main source of freshwater for both mainland China and the vast areas of Southeast and South Asia. The largest and most important rivers that originate in China-controlled Tibet include: a) the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers which are vital to China, b) the Indus and Brahmaputra⁸ which are the lifeline to India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, as well as c) the Irrawaddy and Mekong in Southeast Asia. In this light, the annexation—or “liberation” in Beijing’s narrative—of the de facto independent Tibet in 1950 seems to have been one of the most strategically advantageous moves of the newly-emerged communist China. In other words, by taking over the Tibetan “water tower,”⁹ the PRC took possession of the key to the survival and prosperity not just of China itself, but also of nearly two billion people across South and Southeast Asia.

The control over Tibet and the sources of crucially important rivers not only gives China access to vast resources of freshwater, but also allows it to produce electric energy through a well-developed network of river dams. With the largest number of

⁶ Antonina Luszczkiewicz-Mendis, “Beijing’s ‘Hunger for Power’ and ‘Thirst for Water’: China’s Hydro-Hegemony and Its Potential Impact on South and Southeast Asia,” in Jagannath Panda ed., *Mapping China’s Himalayan Hustle: Revisionism Resistance Must be the Order of the Region* (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, November, 2024), p. 199.

⁷ “A Scientific Assessment of the Third Pole Environment” (2022/4/21), visited date: 2023/3/27, *《UN Environment Programme》*, <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/scientific-assessment-third-pole-environment>.

⁸ Ganges has its source in the southern Great Himalayas on the Indian side of the border with China.

⁹ “Premier Stresses Sustainable Development, Unity in Tibet” (2018/7/28), visited date: 2024/4/19, *《The State Council, the People’s Republic of China》*, https://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/2018/07/28/content_281476240005360.htm.

dams in the world,¹⁰ China has turned hydropower into its main source of renewable energy¹¹ and is aiming to achieve an ambitious goal of carbon neutrality by 2060.¹²

However, China's development policies in Tibet have raised some controversies in environmental, political, and social dimensions. First, even though hydroelectricity fits the concept of renewable energy, erecting and operating dams leads to the destruction of natural habitats, the excessive production of greenhouse gases, and even an elevated risk of earthquakes.¹³ Above all, the reservoirs created as a result of dam constructions have much larger surface areas than rivers; hence, they are responsible for increased water loss through evaporation.¹⁴

Second, the river power plants may not always be a reliable source of energy—as evidenced by the events of summer 2022, when China was hit by the most severe heatwave in six decades.¹⁵ It not only directly affected the lives of 900 million people, but also greatly disturbed China's food industry and factory production.¹⁶ Due to the low water level, some river dams could not generate sufficient energy—as a result, many factories in the country had to be temporarily closed. These dramatic events encouraged the Chinese government to increase the exploitation of coal—which, paradoxically, may only worsen the effects of the climate change in the future, as it may lead to even more severe droughts and increased water scarcity.

Third, constructing river dams and artificial reservoirs results in an irretrievable modification of the natural landscape. As a consequence, the local population usually

¹⁰ “China,” visited date: 2024/3/27, *《International Rivers》*, <https://archive.internationalrivers.org/programs/china>.

¹¹ “How Is China's Energy Footprint Changing?” visited date: 2024/3/27, *《China Power》*, <https://chinapower.csis.org/energy-footprint/>.

¹² Matt McGrath, “Climate Change: China Aims for ‘Carbon Neutrality by 2060’” (2020/9/22), visited date: 2024/3/27, *《BBC》*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-54256826>.

¹³ Samantha Stahl, “Dams + Climate Change = Bad News” (2017/12/12), visited date: 2024/3/27, *《Earth Law Center》*, <https://www.earthlawcenter.org/blog-entries/2017/12/dams-climate-change-bad-news#edn1>.

¹⁴ Samantha Stahl, “Dams + Climate Change = Bad News”.

¹⁵ Dennis Wong and Han Huang, “China's Record Heatwave, Worst Drought in Decades” (2022/8/31), visited date: 2024/3/27, *《South China Morning Post》*, <https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/news/china/article/3190803/china-drought/index.html>.

¹⁶ Dennis Wong and Han Huang, “China's Record Heatwave, Worst Drought in Decades”.

needs to be relocated, which poses a wide range of logistic and geo-ecological challenges. For example, the International Campaign for Tibet warned in 2019 that thousands of people would need to be relocated from the area that was meant to be protected as a UNESCO World Heritage site of the “Three Parallel Rivers.”¹⁷ Furthermore, numerous NGOs have alarmed that the Chinese authorities have been arresting Tibetans who protested against the construction of river dams that involved mass relocation and demolition of historically significant religious sites.¹⁸ Finally, China has been accused of depriving the “dam migrants” of means of livelihood—thus, accounting for their continued impoverishment.¹⁹ This contrasts an image promoted by the Chinese authorities, according to which the relocation schemes result in higher income opportunities, access to a more developed health care system, and better education for children from relocated families.²⁰

Despite these controversies, China continues to expand its dam system, as it allows Beijing not only to generate energy but also to store and divert water. However, China's water investment and development schemes have affected not only the local population and ecosystems; in fact, they have also been a matter of concern for the countries of South and Southeast Asia, i.e., the lower riparians of China which share transboundary rivers, such as the Mekong in Southeast Asia and Brahmaputra in the Indian subcontinent.

China's lower riparian states have been concerned that Beijing can—on the one hand—manipulate the water level on transboundary rivers by excessively releasing

¹⁷ “Damming Tibet's Rivers. New Threats to Tibetan Area under UNESCO Protection” (2019/5/30), visited date: 2024/4/20, *《International Campaign for Tibet》*, <https://savetibet.org/damming-tibets-rivers-new-threats-to-tibetan-area-under-unesco-protection/>.

¹⁸ Himanshu Nitnaware, “Over 1,000 People, Including Monks, Arrested for Opposing Dege Hydropower Dam Project in Tibet” (2024/3/7), visited date: 2024/4/20, *《Down to Earth》*, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/environment/over-1-000-people-including-monks-arrested-for-opposing-dege-hydropower-dam-project-in-tibet-94874>.

¹⁹ “Impoverished Tibetans Protest Forced Relocation and Deprivation of Livelihood amid Increased Chinese Land Expropriation” (2016/11/24), visited date: 2024/4/20, *《The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD)》*, <https://tchrd.org/impoverished-tibetans-protest-forced-relocation-and-deprivation-of-livelihood-amid-increased-chinese-land-expropriation/>.

²⁰ “Premier Li Keqiang Makes Inspection Tour in Tibet” (2018/7/26), visited date: 2024/4/20, *《Tibet.cn》*, http://eng.tibet.cn/eng/index/top/201807/t20180726_6122980.html.

water, which can cause floods beyond China's borders. On the other hand, Beijing's diversion schemes could potentially result in drying up some territories down the stream.²¹ However, it should be clarified that China is not able to dehydrate those areas by simply "turning off" the "taps," as the downstream rivers additionally gain water from their own tributaries or a rainfall. Nonetheless, Beijing's diversion and storage of water from transboundary rivers may have serious implications for the living conditions of the people and the entire biodiversity in the countries of South and Southeast Asia.

In all of this, the most challenging is the fact that the cooperative management of Tibetan water resources is not just a matter of the climate change, developing water infrastructure, or electricity generation—it is also a geopolitical and geoeconomic issue for China, its southern neighbors, and global powers such as the United States.

China's Stance on Water Resources of Tibet

For China, the control over and the use of Tibetan water resources have been inextricably linked with Beijing's sovereignty over Tibet. As a result of the Xinhai Revolution of 1911-12, the newly-emerged Republic of China (ROC) practically lost control over Tibet. Even though Tibet was not recognized as a separate state on the international stage, it continued to exist as a de facto independent country until 1950, when the communist People's Republic of China (PRC) carried out the so-called "peaceful liberation" by sending the People's Liberation Army to the Tibetan Plateau. The annexation of Tibet by the PRC was then sealed by the so-called Seventeen Point Agreement between the plenipotentiaries of the Central People's Government and the Tibetan representatives in 1951.

The incorporation of Tibet has always been one of the most controversial topics related to the territoriality of China—and thus one of the most politically sensitive issues for Beijing in general. However, understanding a broader historical and ideological context makes it perspicuous as to why China sees any external criticism

²¹ Brian Eyer, "Science Shows Chinese Dams Are Devastating the Mekong" (2020/4/22), visited date: 2023/3/27, *《Foreign Policy》*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/22/science-shows-chinese-dams-devastating-mekong-river/>.

against its water policies in Tibet not only as an interference in its internal affairs, but also as an attack on its sovereignty and territorial security.

China's reaction to the critical comments of US Under Secretary Uzra Zeya about the water politics of the PRC at the Stockholm conference is a good exemplification of Beijing's strategies and narratives. The Global Times article, which was published in response to the criticism raised by the US representative, defends China's efforts to protect its water resources on the Tibetan Plateau. On the one hand, it claims that China has "(...) played a significant role in disaster prevention and reduction for downstream countries such as Laos and India;"²² on the other hand, it assures the readers that water conservation projects run by China have a limited impact on water resources, ecology, and economies of the downstream countries.

In addition to defending China's water politics, the article also emphasizes that "rumors and smears from the West have no scientific basis." It warns the readers that the strategy of the "outside forces" to "sensationalize" the water issue has a negative impact on cooperation between China and the lower riparian states. The article further criticizes the Western countries for being allegedly active in "intervening in water resource security affairs in the Asia-Pacific region." According to the Global Times, the West has been using water diplomacy as a battlefield, trying to wage a conflict against China.

To answer a question as to why the United States would "continue to spread rumors about China's utilization and protection of water resources," the article describes a multistep mechanism, allegedly applied by Washington:

first, they release inaccurate satellite remote sensing monitoring data or reports regarding China's hydropower projects; second, they recruit so-called independent journalists in downstream countries through funding and other means; third, they directly intervene in the affairs of the Mekong River region and establish the cooperative schemes with Southeast Asian countries; fourth, they publish misleading and one-sided commentaries

²² "Why Do the US and Dalai Lama Clique Smear China's Dam Operation and Water Resources Development on Qinghai-Xizang Plateau?"

or programs through websites, newspapers, books, and television, openly sowing discord between upstream and downstream countries.

The Global Times summarizes that the US and the “Dalai Lama clique” have been responsible for creating “hotspots” by purposefully “sensationalizing water resource issues to undermine cooperation between China and downstream countries, and sow discord between nations. Then they mislead the general public to blacken normal engineering construction, and affect regional stability and harmony.”

It is important to note that the Global Times did not choose to comment on the Stockholm water conference at random. Uzra Zeya, who represented the US Department of State at the Swedish venue, had been appointed as Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights in July 2021. In December 2021, ahead of her expected appointment as Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, she had received bipartisan letters from members of the US Congress. The US congressmen and senators representing both the Democratic and the Republican parties urged for organizing a meeting between President Joe Biden and the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama; they also called for the full implementation of US laws on Tibet and continued exclusion of the phrase “Tibet is part of China” from future US reports and statements.²³ The Chinese Global Times criticized that initiative, claiming that the US politicians have been “racking their brains in playing all cards with China’s Xinjiang and Xizang regions in order to push for tougher policies against China (...)”²⁴ According to the Chinese platform, the letter to Under Secretary Zeya showcased Washington’s “paranoid mentality.” Nonetheless, the editors prophesized that “those who are eager to play all these cards would lose fast.”

Chinese attacks at Under Secretary Uzra Zeya further increased when she was appointed to serve concurrently as the United States Special Coordinator for Tibetan

²³ “Rubio, Leahy Lead Bipartisan Colleagues in Letter to State Department in Support of Tibetan Autonomy” (2021/12/14), visited date: 2024/4/20, 《Marco Rubio. U.S. Senator for Florida》, <https://www.rubio.senate.gov/rubio-leahy-lead-bipartisan-colleagues-in-letter-to-state-department-in-support-of-tibetan-autonomy/>.

²⁴ Liu Xin and Wan Hengyi, “US Politicians Play ‘Xizang Cards’ to Pressure China Ahead of Winter Games” (2021/12/16), visited date: 2024/4/20, 《Global Times》, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1241607.shtml>.

Issues in December 2021.²⁵ In this role she was expected to manage and coordinate a variety of Tibet-related issues, in accordance with the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002 (amended by the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020) and, most importantly, promote dialogue between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Dalai Lama, his representatives, and democratically elected leaders of the Tibetan community outside of China. In addition, her agenda included environmental protection and sustainable management of water and other natural resources on the Tibetan Plateau.

China has never endorsed the establishment of the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, as in its view it was yet another attempt by Washington to interfere in China's internal affairs. Spokesperson Hua Chunying stressed during a press conference that "Tibet affairs are purely internal affairs of China and no external forces have the right to interfere."²⁶ In other words, Beijing viewed the establishment of this position as "just a move of political manipulation, meant to interfere in China's internal affairs and undermine Tibet's development and stability."²⁷ The spokesperson concluded that China "has always been firmly opposed to this and has never recognized it."²⁸

Similarly, the Beijing government condemned Zeya's appointment as the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues in 2021. Zhu Weiqun, former head of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, emphasized in an interview by the Global Times that "although the Chinese central government had some dialogues with the Dalai Lama clique in the past, these are not the US' business, and China will not allow the US to

²⁵ Antony J. Blinken, "Designation of Under Secretary Uzra Zeya as the U.S. Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues" (2021/12/20), visited date: 2024/4/20, *U.S. Department of State*, <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-under-secretary-uzra-zeya-as-the-u-s-special-coordinator-for-tibetan-issues/>.

²⁶ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on December 8, 2020," visited date: 2024/4/20, *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Bahrain*, http://bh.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202012/t20201208_1049376.htm.

²⁷ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on December 8, 2020".

²⁸ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on December 8, 2020".

play any role in the dialogues.”²⁹ He also noted that “the Dalai clique’s separatist attempt to disrupt Xizang’s development and stability under the central administration, or the US’ attempt to interfere in Xizang affairs over the years, such as the riots in Lhasa in 2008, have all ended in failure.”³⁰

Apparently, Beijing has linked the establishment and activities of the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues with censuring the United States for interfering in China’s internal affairs—basing on claims that Washington was responsible for inciting riots and social unrest among the Tibetan community. It is noteworthy that Beijing has applied a similar narrative every time a US delegate met with the Dalai Lama, accusing Washington of supporting separatists whose goal is to obtain independence for Tibet.³¹

US Policies on Tibet: Water as a “Continental Challenge”

In recent years, the US government has increasingly paid attention to Chinese water projects—with special regard for development schemes that involve transboundary rivers originating in Tibet. Washington’s concerns about China’s ambitious, unrestricted hydrological activity in Tibet were mirrored in the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, signed by President Donald Trump in December 2020. The legislation is better known for authorizing the US government to put sanctions—including the denial of entry—on any Chinese official who will interfere in the succession process of the current Dalai Lama. In addition, however, the act encourages the development of water security frameworks which would “facilitate cooperative agreements among all riparian nations (...) on impounding and diversion of waters that

²⁹ Yang Sheng and Wan Hengyi, “US Has No Role to Play in China’s Xizang Affairs, as Washington Appoints New ‘Special Coordinator for Tibet’” (2021/12/21), visited date: 2024/4/20, *《Global Times》*, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1243051.shtml>.

³⁰ Yang Sheng and Wan Hengyi, “US Has No Role to Play in China’s Xizang Affairs, as Washington Appoints New ‘Special Coordinator for Tibet’”.

³¹ “U.S. Urged to Stop Using Tibet-Related Issues to Interfere in China’s Internal Affairs” (2021/7/29), visited date: 2024/4/20, *《Xinhuanet》*, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-07/29/c_1310095223.htm.

originate on the Tibetan Plateau.”³²

In early January 2021, just before the end of President Trump's term, the White House declassified the “US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific.”³³ The document highlighted Washington's commitment to offer support to India in addressing “continental challenges” through diplomatic, military, and intelligence channels. Among those continental challenges, two issues were named: India's border dispute with its communist neighbor as well as access to water, “including the Brahmaputra and other rivers facing diversion by China.”³⁴ The content of the document indicates that the US government is cognizant of both the existing and potential threats that stem from Beijing's hydrological leverage over the states of South and Southeast Asia.

In addition to the Brahmaputra, Washington has also been closely monitoring the situation on the Mekong River, which flows out of China through Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. China has numerous cut down the water flow on the Mekong River without a prior warning to the riparian states, affecting fishing and farming activities.³⁵ China's maneuver in early 2021 was considered particularly controversial, as barely three months earlier Beijing had signed an agreement with the Mekong River Commission to share the year-round hydrological data on the upper streams of the Mekong River.³⁶

China's dam operations on the Mekong have been a subtle but clear warning about the possible geopolitical and geoeconomic consequences of both unintended and

³² “Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2019,” visited date: 2023/3/27, *《U.S. Congress》*, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/4331>.

³³ “U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific,” visited date: 2023/3/27, *《Trump White House Archives》*, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>, p. 5.

³⁴ “Offer support to India – through diplomatic, military, and intelligence channels – to help address continental challenges such as the border dispute with China and access to water, including the Brahmaputra and other rivers facing diversion by China”.

³⁵ Panu Wongcha-Um and Kay Johnson, “China Notifies Mekong River Neighbours It Is Holding Back Waters” (2021/1/6), visited date: 2024/3/27, *《Reuters》*, <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/china-notifies-mekong-river-neighbours-it-is-holding-back-waters-2021-01-06/>.

³⁶ “China to Provide the Mekong River Commission with Year-Round Water Data” (2020/10/22), visited date: 2024/3/27, *《Mekong River Commission》*, <https://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/news/china-to-provide-the-mekong-river-commission-with-year-round-water-data/>.

intended water manipulations on transboundary rivers.³⁷ This has not gone unnoticed by the United States. Having accused Beijing of secretly diverting and storing water,³⁸ Washington announced the Mekong-US Partnership in October 2020, under which it planned to invest more than US\$150 million to support Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.³⁹ The project prioritized governance, transparency, economic connectivity, human capital, as well as health and security; above all, its goal was to improve transboundary cooperation and management of the Mekong River. Additionally, the Trump White House initiated the Mekong Dam Monitor, responsible for providing real-time data on the Mekong River, in December 2020.⁴⁰

Despite the White House power transition in early 2021, President Joe Biden shared the concerns of the previous administration about China's water politics. In February 2021—barely in the second month of Biden's term—Washington called on China to “live up to its commitments on water data transparency.”⁴¹ The Biden White House has also maintained cooperation with the Mekong River states under the Mekong-US Partnership. In March 2021, a representative of the US State Department stressed during the Mekong-US Partnership plenary that Beijing should provide “the accurate, timely, and essential data” on the Mekong; he also appealed to China to consult any dam operations with its neighbors if such actions could “severely impact

³⁷ Brian Eyler, Regan Kwan, and Courtney Weatherby, “New Evidence: How China Turned Off the Tap on the Mekong River” (2020/4/13), visited date: 2024/3/27, *《Stimson》*, <https://www.stimson.org/2020/new-evidence-how-china-turned-off-the-mekong-tap/>.

³⁸ Kay Johnson and Panu Wongcha-um, “Water Wars: Mekong River Another Front in U.S.-China Rivalry” (2020/7/24), visited date: 2024/3/27, *《Reuters》*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mekong-river-diplomacy-insight-idUSKCN24P0K7>.

³⁹ Leigh Hartman, “U.S. Bolsters Commitment to the Nations of the Mekong Region” (2020/10/7), visited date: 2024/3/27, *《Share America》*, <https://share.america.gov/u-s-bolsters-commitment-nations-mekong-region/>.

⁴⁰ “Mekong River: US Calls on China to Live up to Its Commitments on Water Data Transparency” (2021/2/24), visited date: 2024/3/27, *《Asian News International (ANI)》*, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/us/mekong-river-us-calls-on-china-to-live-up-to-its-commitments-on-water-data-transparency20210224085320/>.

⁴¹ “Mekong River: US Calls on China to Live up to Its Commitments on Water Data Transparency”.

water quantity and quality downstream.”⁴²

The growing involvement of the US government in water politics in the region suggests that Washington understands the gravity of this problem and recognizes its long-term consequences. As evidenced by the Global Times comments, the US strategies and initiatives have been perceived by Beijing as attempts to interfere in China's internal affairs; hence, prompting China to strongly oppose Washington's schemes involving Tibetan water resources.

Conclusion

Based on this analysis, it seems justified to claim that both Beijing and Washington have been paying a lot of attention to the Tibetan water issue; however, their political narratives differ significantly.

China's narrative focuses on Beijing's sovereignty over its “own” territory and water resources. Beijing views any critical voice from outside or foreign initiative that excludes the Chinese government as an attempt to interfere in China's internal affairs. The control and management of Tibet's water resources is a particularly sensitive issue for Beijing due to the political, historical, and ideological context of the status of Tibet. Against this backdrop, China refuses to participate in any discussions and negotiations involving the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan expatriate community. Moreover, Beijing strongly rejects the accusations of human rights violations and environmental exploitation in China's hydrological projects on the Tibetan Plateau. Finally, Beijing presents the water issue as one of its internal matters that need to be protected from foreign influences. From the PRC's point of view, it becomes even more controversial when the questions about China's management of Tibetan rivers are raised by Beijing's main competitor: the United States.

Opposing China's narrative, Washington has been trying to justify its involvement in cooperation schemes—based on economic security and water data sharing—with the

⁴² Atul Keshap, “Remarks at the Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue Opening Plenary” (2021/3/18), visited date: 2024/3/27, *U.S. Department of State*, <https://www.state.gov/remarks-at-the-mekong-u-s-partnership-track-1-5-policy-dialogue-opening-plenary/>.

downstream countries that have reportedly been affected by Beijing's water maneuvers. Washington openly accuses Beijing of implementing large-scale water diversion and development projects that neither include an input from the local Tibetan population nor take into account the geoeconomic security and ecological sustainability of the South and Southeast Asian countries.

Without a doubt, there is a growing mistrust and suspiciousness of China's real plans and intentions—both among South and Southeast Asian states and the broad international community. This leads us to the final question: are these concerns justified?

First, China has rejected international treaties on water-sharing. For example, Beijing voted against the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses of 1997.⁴³ Based on mutual benefit and cooperation principles, the treaty aims to establish norms for cooperation and management schemes over transboundary rivers among riparian countries.⁴⁴ Indeed, China does have bilateral agreements with some of its neighbors—such as an agreement on sharing water data on the Brahmaputra River with India;⁴⁵ however, Beijing has not expressed interest in multilateral treaties.

Second, China's dam maneuvers on transboundary rivers have numerous caused controversies. In addition to China's operations on the Mekong River—about which the countries of the Southeast Asia were neither warned, nor consulted—the practices of water-sharing on the Brahmaputra River have been a matter of increasing concern for the government in New Delhi. The lack of warning from China about the upcoming flood in September 2017—despite the existing agreement on water data-sharing—as

⁴³ “Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses : Resolution / Adopted by the General Assembly” (1997), visited date: 2024/4/21, *《United Nations Digital Library》*, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/284833>.

⁴⁴ Neeraj Singh Manhas and Dr. Rahul M. Lad, “China's Weaponization of Water in Tibet: A Lesson for the Lower Riparian States” (2024/3-4), visited date: 2024/4/20, *《Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs》*, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3703876/chinas-weaponization-of-water-in-tibet-a-lesson-for-the-lower-riparian-states/>.

⁴⁵ “Memorandum of Understanding between Ministry of Water Resources, The People's Republic of China and Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, Republic of India upon Provision of Hydrological Information of the Brahmaputra River in Flood Season by China to India” (2013/5/20), visited date: 2024/4/20, *《Ministry of External Affairs. Government of India》*, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/CH13B0811.pdf>.

well as the contamination of the Siang River in the Indian state of Assam in December 2017 raised India's suspicions about China's upstream activities.⁴⁶ Some experts have linked these incidents with the Doklam standoff that involved the Chinese and Indian troops in the Himalayan region in summer 2017, and have interpreted them as Beijing's retaliation against New Delhi.⁴⁷

Third, the mistrust resulting from the lack of transparency and uncertainty about Beijing's far-fetched goals makes it extremely challenging to establish and develop cooperative water-sharing platforms in the region with China's participation. Regardless of China's real intentions, the downstream countries of South and Southeast Asia have increasingly been suspicious of Beijing's powerful "water card."⁴⁸ With the ongoing global climate change, these tributary states fear that by manipulating the water level, Beijing might try to bend them to its own will—forcing to act in concordance with China's political, economic, or even military interests.⁴⁹ As a consequence, countries that share Tibet-originating rivers seem to be now rushing to secure water resources by erecting their own river dams and creating artificial reservoirs. Reportedly, a senior Indian government official told the Times of India that since it would be naïve to trust Beijing, "India too needs its counter-contingency plans on a mission mode."⁵⁰ As a result, India is expediting its dam projects in the state of Arunachal Pradesh that has been disputed by China—risking the increase of tensions with Beijing.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Neeraj Singh Manhas and Dr. Rahul M. Lad, "China's Weaponization of Water in Tibet: A Lesson for the Lower Riparian States".

⁴⁷ Chandan Kumar Duarah, "Water Data Sharing Leads India-China Toward Better Trans-Boundary Water Cooperation" (2018/9/26), visited date: 2024/4/20, 《*South Asia Journal*》, <https://southasiajournal.net/water-data-sharing-leads-india-china-toward-better-trans-boundary-water-cooperation/>.

⁴⁸ Patrick Mendis and Antonina Luszczykiewicz, "The Geopolitics of Water and the New Indo-Pacific Strategy" (2021/3/22), visited date: 2024/4/20, 《*Harvard International Review*》, <https://hir.harvard.edu/geopolitics-of-taiwan-and-tibet/>.

⁴⁹ Patrick Mendis and Antonina Luszczykiewicz, "The Geopolitics of Water and the New Indo-Pacific Strategy".

⁵⁰ Manash Pratim Gohain, "Fearing 'Water War' by China, Government Puts Arunachal Dams on Fast Track" (2023/1/19), visited date: 2024/4/20, 《*The Times of India*》, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/97103428.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

⁵¹ Antonina Luszczykiewicz, 「The Geopolitics of Water in China-India Relations」, 在李大中編, 邁向新冷戰：強權競逐下的國際秩序 (新北市：淡江大學出版中心, 2024 年), 頁 278。

In the ensuing years, the growing international impact of China's water strategies and activities on the Tibetan Plateau—coupled with the dynamics of the global climate change—will certainly amplify mistrust among other countries of the region. In a more distant future, access to shrinking freshwater resources might prompt an open interstate conflict; in a shorter perspective, however, it is reasonable to expect an increase of political tensions over Tibetan waters—especially in light of the Sino-American rivalry.