

## ***China and the National River Network***

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A conference entitled 'Asian Security and China in 2000-2010' was recently held in New Delhi. The IDSA invited 35 scholars to debate on China's strategic role in Asia.

Unexpectedly, Defence Minister George Fernandes termed the border war of 1962 as a mere "clash". Perhaps he was preparing for his visit to China in April, and was being extra cautious.

Nevertheless, Mr Fernandes mentioned the "glacial pace" of the normalisation of the Sino-Indian relations. No doubt the "glacial" speed is due to the high Himalayan altitude of Sikkim, Aksai Chin and Tibet. This leads us to a more important issue: Water. Where does Asia's waters come from? Due to its geographic location and geological formation, the Tibetan plateau is the main watershed for Asia. Some of the world's greatest rivers, such as Brahmaputra, Yangtze, Mekong, Yellow River, Salween, Sutlej and Indus, originate in Tibet. When Mao invaded the Roof of the World in 1950, he knew Tibet's strategic position and that more than 90 per cent of the water running off to China, South-East Asia and South -Asia came from the region.

In India, the issue of linking major rivers is being taken up by the National River Network. Prime Minister Vajpayee has oft repeated his resolve to make sure that the Rs 560,000 crore project takes off in time. It is good for India. It is certainly necessary to find a solution for the acute shortage of water, not only for the urban centres, but also in the agricultural field which has been shrinking over the years due to industrial development. Nonetheless, a surprising fact is that in their Supreme Court affidavit, the Government listed only four major constraints: The financial cost of the project, the way to preempt and solve inter - states disputes, the environmental problems caused by the new links and the rehabilitation of the displaced population.

The most important factor seems to have been overlooked: Who controls the flow of the Brahmaputra, Indus and Sutlej in their Tibetan segments?

In this context, it is interesting to go back to 1950. In the evening of August 15, a terrible earthquake shook Eastern Tibet. *"This was no ordinary earthquake; it felt like the end of*

*the world,"* wrote Robert Ford, the British Radio operator working in Eastern Tibet. *"Mountains and valleys exchanged places in an instant, hundreds of villages were swallowed up, the Brahmaputra River was completely rerouted and for hours afterwards, the sky over the south-eastern Tibet glowed with an infernal red light, diffused with the pungent scent of sulphur."*

It is a fact that the course of the Brahmaputra changed during those few hours. One may argue that only nature can produce such an upheaval, but nothing is less certain. On August 4, 2000, The Tribune reported a very strange event: "Even three days after the disaster, the mystery of the flashfloods in the Sutlej, which wreaked havoc along its 200-km length in the State, remains unresolved." It added: "Experts are at a loss to understand where the huge mass of water came from." Can you imagine a 50-ft high wall of water descending into the gorges of Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh. In a few hours, more than 100 persons died, 120 km of a strategic highway (Chini sector) was washed away and 98 bridges destroyed. A similar incident had been reported earlier in 2000 in Arunachal Pradesh.

A detailed study carried out a few months later by ISRO scientists affirmed that the release of excess water accumulated in man-made and natural water bodies in the Sutlej and the Siang river basins in Tibet had led to the flooding. These lakes disappeared soon after the disaster struck Indian territory.

It is possible the Chinese had breached these water bodies as a result of which lakhs of cusecs of water were released into the Sutlej and Siang river basins. Given the fact that the Chinese are planning to pump 48 trillion liters of water a year from the Yangtse, across 800 miles, to drought-stricken northern China, diverting the Brahmaputra does not seem such a big deal.

Such niceties may not be discussed by imminent strategists or scholars during a high level international conference, but it is certainly a subject to be taken up with the Chinese when Mr Fernandes visits Beijing in April. Until a treaty like the Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan is signed between India and China, any progress on the border issue may be futile and the work of the Task Force preparing plans for linking the Indian rivers, totally meaningless.