



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Beijing is weaponising water management in Tibet as pressure on India



Beijing's final green light for the **construction** of a mega hydropower plant in Tibet opens up a new arena of tensions with India, adding to an already long list of unresolved border disputes.

In the final days of 2024, Beijing authorised the construction of a dam that will be by far the largest in the world. In fact, it will produce three times more electricity than the current largest, the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, also in China.

The realisation of the gigantic project is currently estimated at almost USD 140 billion, which is four times more than the cost of building the Three Gorges Dam.

India has multiple concerns regarding the approval of this project, ranging from the destruction of the sensitive ecosystem of the Himalayas to safety concerns.

The dam will be located in an enormous gorge where the river Yarlung Zangbo flows into India, where it is known as the Brahmaputra and eventually reaches Bangladesh.

Its colossal dimensions indicate that Beijing has high expectations for its construction and, above all, for its subsequent exploitation, considering that its 300 billion kilowatt-hours of power annually will be enough to supply around 300 million people.

India's multiple concerns

For the same reason, namely the huge size of the hydropower plant and, above all, its location directly on the border, India sees it as multiple threats to its interests.

Last Friday, the New Delhi government **informed** China of its concerns about the plans to build the hydropower plant immediately after Beijing announced its decision.

"The Chinese side has been urged to ensure that the interests of downstream states of the Brahmaputra are not harmed by activities in upstream areas. We will continue to monitor

and take necessary measures to protect our interests," announced the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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India's concern is well-founded because China controls huge upstream watercourses that flow to India. A new huge reservoir would therefore significantly increase China's influence and even pose a potential threat.

The lack of a comprehensive and effective mechanism for **managing** large river courses in the two countries adds to New Delhi's concern, making individual agreements on water management in the common zone a constant source of uncertainty.

In 2017, China unilaterally terminated the exchange of hydrological data about the level of the Brahmaputra with India at a time of tense cross-border relations, citing damage to data collection centres. Only in the following year did the exchange of critical data normalise.

Environmental risks

The construction of the Chinese megastructure poses numerous ecological risks, endangering the sensitive ecosystems in the Himalayas, the local climate, and the living conditions of the population in remote regions.

The risks primarily relate to the interruption of water supplies in large parts of India and Bangladesh, as well as floods or droughts, which these countries will not be able to influence. However, only China will have the ability to manage these risks effectively.

Beijing is determined to go ahead with a gigantic project in the Himalayas, despite the fears and warnings of its largest neighbour

The pollution from China upstream in 2017, which rendered the river's water unfit for human consumption, is still fresh in the memory of India and its rice-growing state of Arunachal Pradesh.

However, it seems that Beijing is determined to go ahead with a gigantic project in the Himalayas, despite the fears and warnings of its largest neighbour. With its huge capacity, the planned hydropower plant will solve many problems for the Chinese economy, which has an ever-growing demand for electricity.

China is determined to implement the project

Given that the project is located in a sparsely populated area, which prevents significant population displacement, Beijing can tolerate the inevitable destruction on Chinese territory.

The financial impact of the future power plant is also very tangible, as it will generate around USD 3 billion for the Tibet autonomous region, giving the central government in Beijing an important lever of political influence in the unstable region.

on its environment - Narendra Modi

The green light for the construction of a mega hydropower plant is also the result of Beijing's desire to restore its shattered reputation as a technological superpower with projects of this magnitude, initially at home but also worldwide.

With its domestic economy cooling down and its international influence weakened by the Belt and Road Project, Beijing simply needs a project of this scale.

For India, the Himalayan project will be an important test of its resilience in the face of aggressive Chinese influence on its environment. The construction of the mega power plant adds a new layer to the already existing numerous points of conflict in the Himalayan zone.



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