Misplaced water diplomacy

It makes little sense for a parched India to be so generous in sharing river waters. Reciprocity is the first principle of diplomacy. But not for India, if one goes by its record. India has walked the extra mile to befriend neighbours, yet today it lives in the world's most-troubled neighbourhood.

India's generosity on land issues has been well documented, including its surrender of British-inherited extraterritorial rights in Tibet in 1954, the giving back of strategic Haji Pir to Pakistan after the 1965 war, and the similar return of territorial gains and 93,000 prisoners after 1971 - all without securing any tangible reciprocity. Despite that record, there are still calls within India today for it to unilaterally cede control over the Siachen Glacier.

Even though India is reeling under a growing water crisis - with hospitals in its capital postponing surgeries because of lack of water and much of the country parched and thirsty - few seem to know that India's generosity has extended not just to land but also to river waters.

The world's most generous water-sharing pact is the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty, under which India agreed to set aside 80.52% of the waters of the six-river Indus system for Pakistan, keeping for itself just the remaining 19.48% share. Both in terms of the sharing ratio as well as the total quantum of waters reserved for a downstream state, this treaty's munificence is unsurpassed in scale in the annals of international water treaties. Indeed, the volume of water earmarked for Pakistan is more than 90 times greater than the 1.85 billion cubic metres the US is required to release for Mexico under the 1944 US-Mexico Water Treaty.

The unparalleled water generosity has only invited trouble for India. Within five years of the Indus treaty, Pakistan launched its second war against India to grab the rest of Kashmir when India had still not recovered from its humiliating rout in 1962 at the hands of the Chinese.

Today, Pakistan expects eternal Indian munificence on water even as its military establishment (with blood of innocent Indians on its hands) continues to export terror. Yet, with all the water flowing downstream under the treaty, the same question must haunt the Pakistani generals as it did Lady Macbeth in William Shakespeare's Macbeth: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?" Meanwhile, India's own Indus basin, according to the 2030 Water Resources Group, confronts a massive 52% deficit between water supply and demand.

India's 1996 Ganges treaty with Bangladesh guarantees minimum cross-border flows in the dry season - a new principle in international water law. In fact, the treaty almost equally divides the downstream Ganges flows between the two countries. Because of that precedent, India seems now ready to reserve almost half of the Teesta river waters for Bangladesh in what will be the world's first water-sharing treaty of the 21st century.

Water is a state issue, not a federal matter, in the Indian Constitution, yet Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has sought to strong-arm West Bengal into accepting a Teesta river treaty on terms dictated by New Delhi. Existing water-sharing treaties elsewhere in the world, by contrast, don't come anywhere close to allocating half of all basin waters to the downstream state. Another key fact is that unlike Bangladesh, India is already a seriously water-stressed
country. Whereas the annual per capita water availability in Bangladesh averages 8,252 cubic metres, it has fallen to a paltry 1,560 cubic metres in India.

Lost in such big-hearted diplomacy is the fact that India is downriver to China, which far from wanting to emulate India's Indus or Ganges style water munificence, rejects the very concept of water sharing. Instead, the construction of upstream dams on international rivers, such as the Mekong, Brahmaputra, Salween, Irtysy, Illy and Amur shows that China is increasingly bent on unilateral actions, impervious to the concerns of downstream nations. Over the next decade, China plans to build more large dams than the US or India has managed in its entire history.

By seeking to have its hand on Asia's water tap through an extensive upstream infrastructure, China challenges India's interests more than any other country's. Although a number of nations stretching from Afghanistan to Vietnam receive waters from the Tibetan Plateau, India's direct dependency on Tibetan waters is greater than of any other country. With about a dozen important rivers flowing in from the Tibetan Himalayan region, India gets almost one-third of all its yearly water supplies of 1,911 cubic km from Tibet, according to the latest UN data.

In this light, it is fair to ask: Is India condemned to perpetual generosity towards its neighbours? This question has assumed added urgency because India has started throwing money around as part of its newly unveiled aid diplomacy - $1 billion in aid to Bangladesh, one-fifth as grant; $500 million to Myanmar; $300 million to Sri Lanka; $140 million to the Maldives; and generous new aid to Afghanistan and Nepal. If pursued with wishful thinking, such aid generosity is likely to meet the same fate as water munificence.

Generosity in diplomacy can yield rich dividends if it is part of a strategically geared outreach designed to ameliorate the regional security situation so that India can play a larger global role. But if it is not anchored in the fundamentals of international relations - including reciprocity and leverage building - India risks accentuating its tyranny of geography, even as it is left holding the bag.