This World Water Day (22 March 2013) calls for cooperation on transboundary rivers. Among 276 transboundary river basins in the World, it makes sense for countries in Indian subcontinent and China to consider it seriously. While the international institutions are trying to define a working definition of 'water security', will India be able to secure unhindered access to water for living beings across McMahon line - the source of all perennial rivers flowing through India?

When the grand Interlinking of Rivers (ILR) mooted by India in 2002, Bangladesh as lower riparian country to India was understandably apprehensive on the social and environmental impacts. After nearly two decades, when China is constructing three hydropower dams on the Brahmaputra River (Yarlang Zangbo as called in China), similar anxiety and apprehension were conveyed by Indian establishment on equivocal terms- from basin States to Parliament. Like Indian government's so called assurance to Dhaka on ILR, the former has received the same assurance of 'no downstream harm' or 'no negative impact' of the hydropower project.

Meanwhile the apprehension is running so high as Indian government caught napping of the development across McMahon line that to save its face India has gone further referring to a possible water treaty with China on Brahmaputra as soon as possible. Will China consider such bilateral water sharing treaty or agreement on Brahmaputra River?

Indian government's wishful rush to enter into a treaty will be rewarded, at best, with a renewal of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). In fact, a MoU on sharing hydrological information of the Brahmaputra River between China and India will be expiring early June this year.

The main rivers originating from China entering into India are Brahmaputra in the North East and Indus and Sutlej in the Northern Part of the country. In 2002, after much deliberation India and China signed a MoU with five years duration to help in forecasting floods caused by the Brahmaputra in north-eastern India. In accordance with the provisions in the MoU, the Chinese side provided hydrological information (water level, discharge and rainfall) in respect of three stations, namely, Nugeshia, Yangcun and Nuxia located on river Brahmaputra from 1st June to 15th October every year through email twice a day, which was utilized in the formulation of flood forecasts by the Central Water Commission (CWC) of India. Way back in 1954 both the countries had signed a MoU to share hydrological data but unfortunately the border war between the two in 1962 halted the progress.

Without any agreement in place during Parechu Lake threat in 2007, after much dilly dallying China allowed Indian delegations to visit Tibet and discuss various options to prevent recurrence of such situation like Glacier Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF) or artificial lakes. Subsequently, In 2008 a MoU was entered by both countries on sharing information on the Brahmaputra river in flood season with a five year validity. Another MoU was signed in April 2005 for supply of water flow information in respect of Sutlej (Langquin Zangbu) in flood season from Tsada station on river Sutlej. A new MoU on supply of flood season hydrological information on River Sutlej agreed in August 2010 by both the countries.

Acknowledging the importance of transboundary rivers in their overall bilateral relations, during Chinese President's visit to India in 2006 an agreement reached at to set up an Expert-Level Mechanism (ELP) to discuss interaction and cooperation on provision of flood season hydrological data, emergency management and other related issues regarding rivers. Since, four meeting were held with only headway in establishing trust among the members on hydrological information on Brahmaputra River! The question arises if the Indian members were being informed about such hydropower projects in Brahmaputra or not during these four meetings in alternative venues? Have the Indian members of ELM raised the issue with their counterpart? The official briefings were saying otherwise.
At the same time, China entered into an agreement with lower riparian of Brahmaputra-Bangladesh in 2010. However, the treaty has not been functioning and the Parliament is debating of its functionality. A friendly government in Dhaka may be an advantage for the time being, but India can not avoid assessing the unpredictable and uncertain future. It is interesting to note that China entered simple hydrological information sharing MoUs with India and Bangladesh separately at same time. Despite the rationale of Beijing-Dhaka MoU, bypassing India -the largest Brahmaputra basin country, China has cornered India on Brahmaputra River.

As long as China angle has not interfered in India's unilateral design to harness any international rivers which mostly originates in Chinese territory, India has been entering into bilateral treaties with Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. The recent Chinese power projects have shifted the bilateral bonhomie and opened for a new era of hydro-diplomacy for India and for the region.

India has always downplayed the role of third party be it World Bank (for eastern Himalayan rivers), or US, or Nepal, or Bangladesh, or China, or Bhutan in its bilateral water engagements. Earlier, Nepal and Bangladesh have made several demands for such tripartite or multi-party water treaty among the basin countries to make the water negotiations symmetric with respect to India. Now, India seems to be drawn into a relatively symmetric power game as both lower riparian, as well as upper riparian country at least in the case of Brahmaputra River.

The track record of India and China in international water treaties is discouraging due to their geophysical position as relative upper riparian countries. Both countries are not signatory to presently available two international covenants which administer the international watercourse. The less hyped and much talked about 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses is almost dysfunctional due to the adamant nature of upper riparian countries. To substitute the General Assembly adopted least legally binding 1997 Convention, last November, the 1992 UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) ‘Convention on Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lake’ made open to all UN member countries to sign and ratify for lessening the friction on shared river water. Both China and India have not shown any interest to consider this Convention in the near future as well.

Having such track records of both countries' unilateralism on harnessing shared water, there is an immediate need of a broader long-term framework on shared water between India and China. The border dispute mostly the 1030 KM of Arunachal Pradesh would be major hindrance as the Yarlang Zangbo enters to India as Brahmaputra in Arunachal Pradesh (as Dihang or Siang). China has already dismantled India's development aspiration on Arunachal Pradesh in Manila based Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2009.

As the Chinese President Xi Jinping categorically differentiate the border dispute with other major potential issue, a step forward would be to share the prospective plans on Brahmaputra Rivers by both countries under the water sharing framework. The perspective plan includes all past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects or activities on the river by both countries. A cumulative impact assessment study on Brahmaputra River Basin should be taken by China, India and Bangladesh in the light of climate change, river ecology, and over all environmental consideration. Both Countries leadership must ensure ELM with a broad mandate to continue dialogue regularly and effectively for climate setting for the treaty making. Both Asian largest economy need to cooperate on shared water. This World Water Day may entice such prospects in Delhi and Beijing at sidelines of fifth BRICS Summit at Durban.