

## Brahmaputra River Basin

# Sheikh Hasina's Masterstroke For Regional Cooperation

by Ramtanu Maitra

March 26—A multi-nation river project, which has been on the books since the 1970s, and will upgrade or save hundreds of thousands of lives of the poorest people in Asia, otherwise in danger of devastation by chronic floods and diseases, is finally on a path to realization.

On March 22, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Dipu Moni told a press conference in Dhaka that during her March 17-19 visit to China, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed made a proposal to her counterpart, Wen Jiabao, to participate in the development of a joint basin-wide management for the Brahmaputra River. "They have described it as a good proposal. We have also made the proposal to India," Dipu Moni said.

In January, Hasina concluded a highly successful state visit to India aimed at bringing these two neighboring countries closer, in the joint task of confronting terrorism, and building a new future around trade, transit, and transport. In the first state visit hosted by India in 2010, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced a \$1 billion line of credit, the largest ever one-time grant India has given to any other country, to spur the economic transformation of Bangladesh.

"The two sides [Bangladesh and China] discussed the need for regular exchange of information and consultation on the use of the water resources of the River Yarlu Zangbu/Brahmaputra to ensure sustainable and mutually beneficial cooperation in this regard," said the joint communiqué issued in Beijing on March 19, on the concluding day of Sheikh Hasina's visit to the coun-



UN/Eskinder Debebe

*Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed's proposal to her Chinese counterpart, Wen Jiabao, for joint development of the Brahmaputra River basin, is a case of brilliant statecraft.*

try. It called for basin-wide management for all 54 rivers shared by Bangladesh and India; and for a Joint Rivers Commission, involving all co-riparian countries, including Bhutan and Nepal, a former member of the Indo-Bangla Joint Rivers Commission said.

### The Mighty Brahmaputra<sup>1</sup>

The necessity to manage the waters of the Brahmaputra River was acknowledged as far back as the inception of Bangladesh in the early 1970s, at a time when the Cold War was waged most vigorously. While India, a non-aligned nation, was much closer to the Soviet Union than to the West, Bangladesh (formerly, East Pakistan), born out of the ashes of Pakistani devasta-

1. Son of the Creator, Brahma.



creative commons/Raiyan Kamai

*The two consecutive floods of 1987 and 1988, which were unusually severe, inundated more than 40% of the land area of Bangladesh. Shown: the Baridhara section of the capital, Dhaka, during the 2004 flood.*

tion, became wholly dependent on the Western powers for its survival. The British-Saudi influence over Bangladesh, presided over by the United States and the IMF, made proposals to manage and utilize the Brahmaputra River waters, by the countries sharing a part of the river basin—a non-starter.

The 2,840 km (1,775 miles)-long Brahmaputra River originates in southwestern Tibet in China, and flows through the Arunachal Pradesh and Assam Valley in India before entering Bangladesh to meet the Padma, one of the two major carriers of Ganga water. The Brahmaputra has its origin on the northern slope of the Himalayas, in Tibet, where it is called the Yarlu Zangbu. It flows towards the east for a length of about 1,130 km (700 miles), and then turns south and enters Arunachal Pradesh, a state of India bordering Tibet, at its northernmost point and flows for about 480 km (300 miles). Then it turns westward and flows through Arunachal Pradesh, the Indian states of Assam and Meghalaya for another about 650 km (400 miles), and then enters Ban-

gladesh. At the India-Bangladesh border, the river curves southward and continues for about 240 km (150 miles) to its confluence with the Ganges.

Within Bangladesh, the width of the river channel varies, ranging from less than 2.0 km to more than 12.0 km. During low flows in Winter and Summer, the river becomes a multiple-channel stream with sand bars in-between, and the channels shift back and forth between the main stream banks. An aerial view of the river shows many channels, shoals, and islands, which indicate a river of low hydraulic efficiency with heavy sediment load.

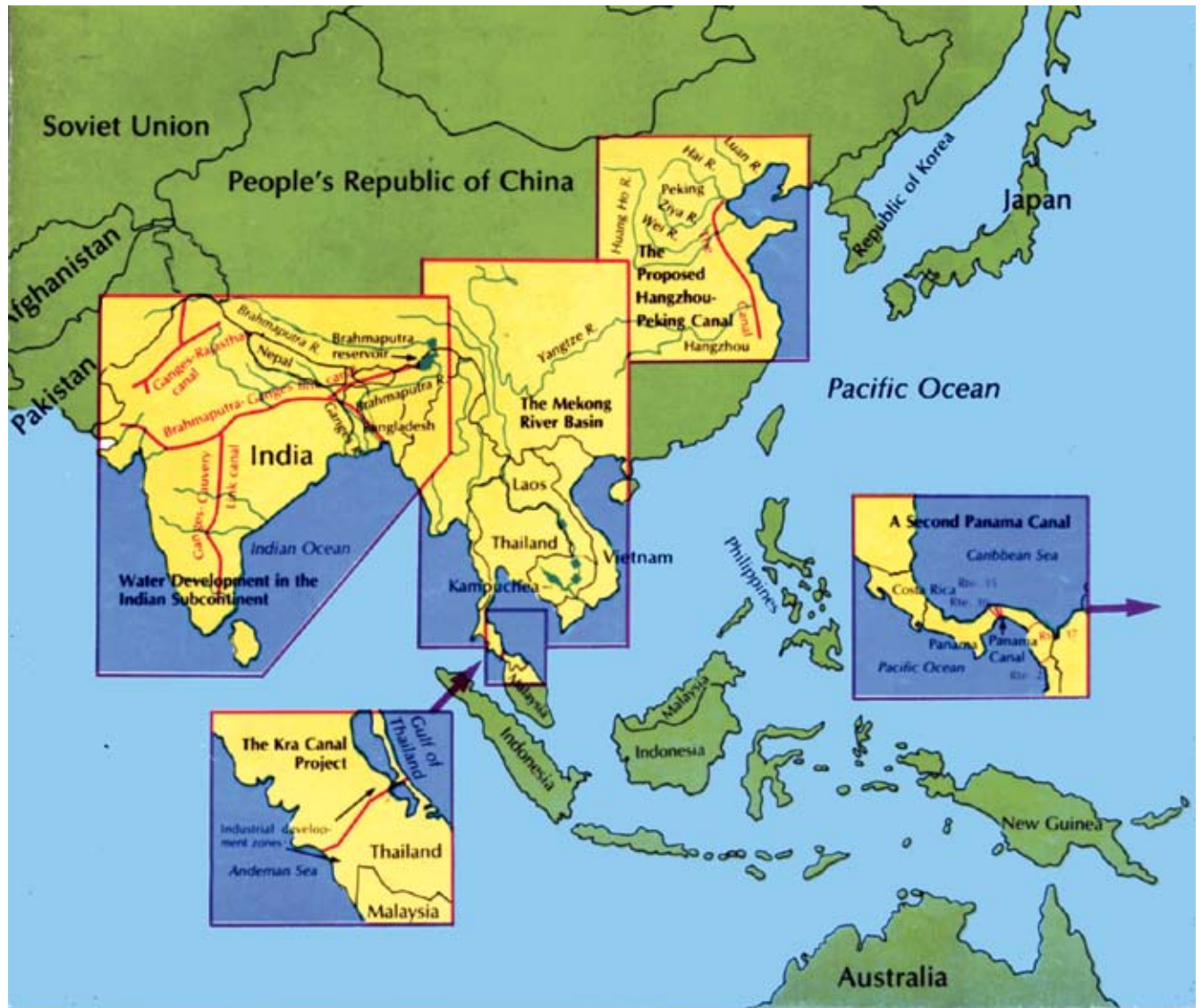
The average annual water flow is about 678,000 cusecs (cubic feet per second), which is nearly twice that of the Ganga. The flow in the Brahmaputra River is mostly contributed by the snowmelt in China, on the other side of the Himalayas, before it enters Arunachal Pradesh.

In Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Meghalaya of India, and the northern districts of Bangladesh, rainfall is quite heavy, and this contributes a substantial amount of flow in the river. Once the river meets the Padma, a branch of the Ganga, it is known in Bangladesh as the Jamuna River.

The Brahmaputra River basin, however, consists of 54 rivers, among which, the Brahmaputra is the largest water carrier. Another major carrier is the Meghna River, which, in conjunction with the Surma, forms a river system, flowing east of the Brahmaputra through Bangladesh. Out of the two main branches, the Surma River rises as the Barak, on the southern slopes of the Nagaland-Manipur watershed in India. Both the branches eventually join the Meghna inside Bangladesh. The new river thus formed, called the lower Meghna, is one of the widest rivers in the world, resembling a freshwater sea. This is also the confluence of three great rivers—the Padma, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna—fed by the water coming down the southern slopes of the Himalayas.

The combined discharge of three river systems of the Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna comes down through virtually flat Bangladesh territory with a fury during the monsoon months (June through September), spills over the embankments, and floods the basin and sub-basin areas almost every year. Each flood results in transfer of large quantities of suspended silts into the adjacent flood plain. The two consecutive floods of 1987 and 1988, which were unusually severe, flooded more than 40% of the land area of Bangladesh.

FIGURE 1



EIR

The “Great Projects” proposed by Lyndon LaRouche, as presented in the EIR Special Report, “A Fifty-Year Development Policy for the Indian-Pacific Oceans Basin,” 1983.

### A Grand Project Proposed

Umpteen proposals have been floated over the years, on the necessity to manage these rivers. In addition, the weak water flow through them during the dry season reduces water availability for agricultural purposes significantly. Moreover, increased drawdown of water from the Ganga, west of Bangladesh, began to pose serious problems as far back as the 1970s.

Among those making proposals for a major water-management project during that time, were Lyndon LaRouche and *EIR*, who emphasized in print, and at a

number of international conferences, the vital necessity of this life-saving project.

In 1978, India and Bangladesh set up a Joint Rivers Commission for augmentation of the Ganga River. While Bangladesh proposed storage of Ganga water during the high-flow season by constructing dams and reservoirs, mostly in Nepal, the Indian proposal focused on inter-flow basin transfer of water from the Brahmaputra basin to the Ganga basin through a gravity link canal.

The Indian argument was that their plan would also

minimize the flood hazards, since the flow in the Brahmaputra rises—due to melting of snow in both the northern and southern slopes of the Himalayas—more than two months before the flow peaks in the Ganga. There were good reasons why India was particularly interested in such a water-transfer scheme. A significant part of the water resources of India lies in the Brahmaputra River, which is located in a remote corner of the country and far from the areas where the demand for water is high. The Brahmaputra River accounts for 29% of the total runoff of all of India's rivers.

Subsequently, in the early 1980s, the Mitsubishi Research Institute (MRI) of Japan, in its proposals for ten worldwide Great Infrastructure Projects (GIFs), included the management of the Brahmaputra River to prevent floods and devastation caused by the river in Bangladesh. That project envisioned tunneling through the Himalayas, at the confluence of Bhutan and Nepal, bringing in a large amount of water from the Yarlu Zangbu on the northern foothills of the Himalayas, directly into Bangladesh. It was never clear what level of success the MRI achieved in getting the project heard.

### **Geopolitical Obstructionists**

However, none of the proposals were ever discussed with the intent of executing them. The prime reason was the deep mistrust among India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, sown by the internal and external geopoliticians engaged in the Cold War. Equally important, was that there was no input from China at the time. China was closed and isolated, and was not looking beyond its own boundaries.

The opposition to the harnessing and managing the Brahmaputra River basin water was conducted wholly through various environmental groups, such as the International Rivers (previously known as the International River Networks) and NGOs. Since the end of the Cold War, the campaign has not abated. NGOs backed by the United Nations are deeply involved in opposing various dam and hydroelectric projects that India is building in its northeast.

Last November, during a lecture in Shillong, in the Indian state of Meghalaya, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, who chairs the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, told the audience that she opposes the plan to build large dams in northeast India, because such development projects would infringe upon the rights of the indigenous people. Using the authority bestowed on her by the international drug-legalization lobby, Tauli-Corpuz

said: "I have learnt that the government proposes to set up some 100 dams in the northeast of India. It may be a clean source of energy, but it should not be carried out at the cost of the rights of the local indigenous people."

Tauli-Corpuz is but a run-of-the-mill environmentalist, who was given her authority by international pro-drug kingpin George Soros's partner, Britain's Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Malloch-Brown, as UN Development Program Administrator in 2000, had set up the UNDP-Civil Society Organizations (CSO) Advisory Committee to advise him on the orientation, thrusts, and programs of the UNDP from a civil society perspective. He assigned Tauli-Corpuz to head the UNDP-PCSO, where she pushed for the creation of a UNDP Policy of Engagement with Indigenous Peoples.

In addition to the drug lobby's concerns reflected in the Tauli-Corpuz-Malloch Brown campaign, London was busy strengthening New Delhi's suspicions about China in the area. For instance, the *Times* of London, on Nov. 20, 2006, published an article, "Millions live in fear that China aims to steal their river," which was virtually void of truth. It said: "China is considering damming the Brahmaputra, which begins as the Yarlu Zangbu in Tibet before cascading down through northeast India and Bangladesh to the Bay of Bengal. The idea is to divert much of the flow to the Yellow River to ease water shortages in northern China that threaten to undermine economic growth and social stability. Those downstream, however, fear that the project would bring economic and ecological disaster, as well as disrupting India's own plans to harness the Brahmaputra's waters."

The article continued: "Chinese officials deny adopting the plan and many experts dismiss it as fantasy. But Indian officials remain unconvinced, mindful of China's penchant for gargantuan water projects and its opaque political system. The controversy illustrates the enduring friction between India and China, which fought a border war in 1962, and are now in a race to claim global superpower status. India has long bristled at Chinese sales of weapons and nuclear technology to Pakistan. Tensions surfaced again last week when Sun Yuxi, the Chinese Ambassador to India, reasserted Beijing's claim to the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal... Few believe that China would invade Arunachal, but there is genuine concern that it could one day claim the Brahmaputra's waters..."

Besides London's blatant attempt to trigger fresh China-India animosity, the issue is also a favorite of the "action crowd"—the jihadis, backed by the British-

FIGURE 2  
**The Brahmaputra/Yarlung Tsangpo (Yarlu Zangbu) River system**



Saudi-Pakistani ISI (Pakistan's intelligence service) financiers and protectors. Consider the reactions among the jihadis in Bangladesh against the proposed Tipaimukh Dam on the Barak River in the Indian state of Manipur bordering Myanmar. Former Bangladeshi Prime Minister and handmaiden of the Saudi-jihadi-ISI network, Begum Khaleda Zia, is now a drummer for the NGOs and environmentalist groups opposing the building of this dam.

Last year, after her party suffered a decisive electoral defeat, Zia sent a letter to Prime Minister Singh asking him to abandon the project. She was aware that Prime Minister Hasina was not willing to oppose the dam just because it is being built by India; she was using her newly-adopted environmental credentials to rev up her jihadi mob and their financiers. During her visit to India, Sheikh Hasina discussed the issue with New Delhi, and both countries have set up teams to discuss and clarify what the dam will achieve.

### What Is at Stake?

The joint development of the Brahmaputra River basin, as proposed by Hasina, is a masterstroke because, when eventually completed, it will bring about a sea-change in the area. The project would bring India-Ban-

gladesh and China, in cooperation with their neighbors Bhutan and Nepal, to work for a large water management project, which would surely involve many infrastructure developmental aspects. Moreover, China, unlike other participants in this project, will not directly benefit from the project itself, but, surely will emerge as a large nation keen to bring to success major infrastructural projects in its neighborhood.

The real beneficiary will be the regional population, which is larger than the population of Western Europe or the North American continent, and live precariously in the area. One open secret in India, in line with the drugs pouring into the country, causing addiction all across the northeast, is that the area has remained in deep turmoil for decades, and has nurtured secessionist rebels, using the waters of the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. Neighboring Myanmar has a number of powerful insurgent groups that are interlinked with the Indian northeastern rebels.

A large portion of the illegal weapons that comes into northeast India originate in Cambodia. The underground route to South Asia is said to begin on the Ranong islands off the Thai coast, whence the arms are shipped through the Andaman Sea, to Cox's Bazar along the Bangladesh coast. From here, the weapons are divvied up into smaller consignments and carried to various destinations in Myanmar and northeastern India through different routes.

In recent days, researchers have pointed out that many of the insurgent outfits in northeast India have established their bases in Bangladesh, and several of their top leaders have been operating from there for a long time now. While Zia, all along, has denied the presence of these militants, or their camps, on Bangladesh's soil, at the official level, the military-backed regime that took over power in Dhaka, in January 2007, had sent informal feelers to India, suggesting that Dhaka had cracked down on many of these insurgent networks inside its territory. Because of the protection provided by the British-Saudi nexus to the Bangladesh's jihadi lobby, Dhaka has been used by a number of northeast Indian terrorists as safe houses and meeting point to plan operations.

All that could be history—if Hasina's masterstroke succeeds.