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The Teesta River Project and Bangladesh's Foreign Policy on Transboundary River Water Management

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Research Article

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Abstract

The unresolved water-sharing crisis over the transboundary Teesta River remains a critical bilateral issue for Bangladesh and India due to India's upstream water control and domestic political complexity. In response, the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TRCMRP), also known as the 'Teesta River Project', has been a venture of the Bangladesh government since 2016 to resolve the water crisis on its side of the border. Despite having the scope to collaborate with China and India—each having signaled to finance and implement the project—no Bangladeshi government has taken a definitive decision to implement it. This research addresses why Bangladesh has been unable to leverage the Teesta River Project for the management of transboundary Teesta River water. Using qualitative primary and secondary data, this research employs the Neoclassical Realist theoretical framework to discuss the underlying factors behind Bangladesh's foreign policy behavior and future trajectory regarding the Teesta River water management in the context of the Teesta River Project issue. This study found that the long stalled bilateral Teesta water-sharing treaty with asymmetrical power relation between Bangladesh and India led the leadership of Bangladesh to initiate the Teesta River Project as a potential alternative response. Bangladesh's strong partnership with China and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provided a potential pathway to address the water crisis independent of Indian cooperation. Bangladesh's decision on the issue is influenced by systemic factor like Sino-Indian geopolitics. This however differ in domestic political approach in Bangladesh—where Hasina government potentially inclined to India-backed Teesta project, the interim government maintained balancing between India and China. The BNP government, on the contrary, shows its intention to implement the Project with Chinese partnership. Together, these findings suggest that while Teesta River Project represents a potential alternative to resolve the Teesta river water crisis, Bangladesh government's policy regarding the project's trajectory ultimately render on leadership's domestic political will and a well-calculated foreign policy course.

I. Introduction

Teesta, Bangladesh's fourth-largest river, originates at Tso Lamo in Sikkim, India, and extends 414 km, of which 113 km is the northern region of Bangladesh[1]. The long-standing unresolved issue of water-sharing between Bangladesh and India over the Teesta river remains a significant bilateral matter. The issue of water-sharing of the Teesta River is regarded as a failure in river basin management due to a lack of political will, trust, and cooperation in negotiation [2]. The federal distribution of power in the Indian Constitution concerning water governance results in fragmented governance, and the lack of a benefit-sharing and integrated ecosystem approach to water governance further exacerbates the issue, as current policies of India prioritise domestic food security and irrigation over transboundary water cooperation[3]. However, there have been long-standing bilateral negotiations between Bangladesh and India regarding the management and sharing of sufficient water during the dry season. Any agreement is yet to achieve as reluctance in cooperation during negotiation is hindering timely approaches to any collective action[4]. This lead to severe water shortages during the dry season in northern Bangladesh that negatively impacts agriculture and local livelihoods[21].

In recent years, several rounds of discussion have taken place to resolve the Teesta River water-sharing issue to reach a mutually acceptable solution. Notably, during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh in 2021, both countries reiterated their commitment to resolving the issue with favorable benefit. However, such significant development remained elusive, primarily due to domestic political scenario in India[5]. Since there has been no progress in bilateral engagement regarding the Teesta water-sharing issue, the Bangladesh government initiated measures to manage the downstream water flow of the Teesta, engaging with China for technical assistance and investment in implementing a river water management project for the Teesta [6]. The tentative project, officially known as 'Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TRCMRP), commonly referred to as 'Teesta Master Plan' or 'Teesta Mega Project' [1] (See figure 1). Since the commencement of its plan in 2016, the long-stalled India-Bangladesh relationship regarding the Teesta River has gained new momentum. China primarily expressed interest in investing in the project; India, in response, announced its interest in funding the project as well [7]. However, the Bangladesh government has not made any decision in this regard. The foreign policy behavior of the government is still ambiguous in this matter with change in approach by different leaderships. It has become new dimension to explore in the management of transboundary Teesta River water-sharing which possess significant implication for Bangladesh.

Existing literature while has addressed various factors related to the Teesta river water-sharing issue; there is a deficit of understanding regarding the case of 'Teesta River Project'. Within the limited body of literature on this issue, Khalequzzaman [1] examined the feasibility of the project and pointed a critical view, Saha [8] analyzed the efficacy of a China-led Teesta Project in management of the transboundary water of the river, Baruah et. al. [7] and Noolkar-Oak [9] argued on the geopolitics and hydropolitics of the Teesta Basin that shape the dynamics of stalled negotiation on water-sharing agreement between Bangladesh and India. Despite these contributions, existing studies do not sufficiently examine how Bangladesh government's policy approach on this issue is shaped and what are the implication associated with it that has been no more a bilateral issue between Bangladesh and India rather became a complex geopolitical issue with regional impact in transboundary river water governance. Therefore, taking Teesta River Project as case study, using qualitative data and the Neo-classical Realist (NCR) framework, this research analyzes both systemic and domestic factors underlying the issue to comprehensively understand Bangladesh's foreign policy behavior on the issue and address the question of why has Bangladesh been unable to leverage the Teesta River Project for the management of transboundary Teesta River water.

While the NCR framework is suitable to analyze foreign policy behavior of a state in different domestic setting, this research will uncover associated factors and show a future direction on management of the transboundary Teesta River in the context of the Teesta River Project. This study organizes in six sections. The finding and discussion section start from section four that introduce Bangladesh's initiation of plan for the Teesta River Project. Section five discuss associated factors using NCR framework, and section six analyses the future of the 'Teesta River Project' on management of the transboundary Teesta River water.

II. Methodology

This research has taken the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TRCMRP) or Teesta River Project as a case study for analysis. Qualitative method is adopted to analyze understand available data on Bangladesh's foreign policy behavior (mostly qualitative), and expert's opinion for which both primary and secondary data were collected. Secondary data from existing literature, reports and contents from government and various news media sources of Bangladesh, India, and China used. Content analysis, method for characterizing and measuring occurrences[10], employed during the analysis of data from various media and government sources.

To strengthen the analysis, primary data collected from 14 open-ended in-depth interviews (IDIs) using hybrid method (on-site and online) conducted with former diplomats, foreign ministry officials, think tank researcher, Teesta river experts and academic scholars of Bangladesh. This used as a supplementary method to gain scholarly interpretations and co-construct knowledge, where both the interviewer and interviewee engage in a reflective dialogue that enriches the research findings [11]. Interviewees were selected carefully based on their expertise and engagement with the Teesta issue at policy, diplomatic, or scholarly levels. The interviews structured into thematic questions on the Teesta water governance, bilateral negotiations, domestic political issues in Bangladesh and India, and Chinese involvement and on the proposed Teesta River Project. Primary data were coded and separated into themes. Triangulation of data accomplished by comparing the findings from IDIs with media sources and existing literatures to supports trustworthiness and avoid subjectivity [12]. The uses of NCR framework ensured constructiveness and reduce biases in analyses.

III. Neoclassical Realist Framework

Neo Classical Realism distinct from Structural Realism is its emphasis on domestic factors in the decision-making process. Where Structural Realism focuses on the anarchic nature of the international system and the distribution of power to understand state behavior, NCR offers a two-level analysis that emphasizes both domestic factors and systemic pressures in global affairs [13-14]. Indeed, Neoclassical Realism stems from Neorealism's shortcomings by addressing its neglect of domestic factors. Advocates of NCR claim, while systemic factors such as anarchic international structure, the distribution of power, remain essential, their direct influence on foreign policy is limited as systemic factors must pass through intervening or domestic variables including leadership perceptions, regime type, institutional structure, strategic culture, public opinion, and bureaucratic politics [13-15-16-19]. This perception of NCR is invaluable to explain why states react differently to similar systemic pressures. Critics of NCR, however, point out its shortcomings due to its wide range of intervening variables that may weaken causal explanation. Others contend that NCR's flexibility shows the difficulty of testing a hypothesis[17-18]. Proponents respond to these claims by arguing that NCR's strength of explaining foreign policy variation under similar systemic conditions with different domestic variables.

For this case study, NCR framework is suitable as it allows to examine all possible factors (domestic and systemic) associated with it as previously both of these factors impacted the dynamics of on Teesta River water sharing issue. For the analyses of this research, three systemic factors are taken—Bangladesh power asymmetry with India (primary material constraint), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China (systemic opportunity), and Sino-Indian geopolitical rivalry (constraint limiting options). As Domestic factors, Leadership Perception and Regime Capacity are selected given their clear observable variation across the two governments, examined using literatures and interviewed IDIs.

IV. The Development of the 'Teesta River Project' Issue

The River Teesta in Bangladesh passes through the Gajoldoba Barrage located in the West Bengal province of India, which constructed in 1976 under the Teesta Barrage Project (TBP), to irrigate land and generate 67.5 MW of hydropower in West Bengal. Therefore, the river flow becomes extremely scarce when it enters Bangladesh. In 1998, Bangladesh constructed the Teesta Barrage Irrigation Project (TBIP), also known as the Dalia Barrage, to supply irrigation water to farmers in three districts in Bangladesh's northern region located near the Teesta River. However, the effectiveness of Dalia Barrage severely curtailed by India's Gajoldoba Barrage, diverting up to 85% of the dry-season downstream flow [20]. Additionally, where the water flow in the Teesta River becomes scarce during the dry season, overflow becomes inevitable during the rainy season due to the opening of the Gajoldoba barrage, damaging livelihoods near the river[59]. There have been long-standing bilateral negotiations between Bangladesh and India regarding the sharing of a sufficient amount of water of the transboundary Teesta River, during the dry season that showed no resolution.

In 2023, Bangladesh's then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina first announced that her government's commitment to implementing the tentative 'Teesta River Project', in a rally in Rangpur district [22]. The project aimed to a comprehensive management of the upstream overflow water of the Teesta River during monsoon—reducing the average width of the river, from approximately 3,000 meters to 816 meters, constructing new channels, storing the overflow upstream water, and utilising it during the dry season, when water scarcity is most prevalent in the Teesta area [1].

Table-1: Development Timeline of Teesta River Project Issue Source: Author's compilation

2016	Chinese power corporation (PowerChina) draws up a comprehensive management plan for the Teesta River at the request of the Bangladesh Water Development Board.
2019	PowerChina submitted the TRCMRP report that was approved on May 30, 2019.
2020	By August, reports indicated that China had primarily agreed to fund the project with nearly $1 billion in assistance.
2021	Secrecy was maintained by the Bangladesh government regarding the project. PowerChina released a video publicly about it, making the Bangladeshi public aware through a foreign company rather than their own government.
2022	In November, Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Li Jiming publicly reiterated that China was actively considering the project and would implement it if Bangladesh wished.
2023	Sheikh Hasina announced that her government is committed to implementing the highly anticipated Teesta mega plan, in a rally in Rangpur district
2024	China set to collaborate on the comprehensive management and restoration of the Teesta River. India counter proposed an investment plan for the Teesta Project by its foreign secretary. Sheikh Hasina expressed a preference for India in a press conference to undertake the project. In July, the Hasina Government ousted by an uprising and Muhammad Yunus led interim government formed.
2025	Interim government signed an MoU with China for a further feasibility study for the Teesta Project and China reassured it commitment to implement the project The interim government has moved to implement the Teesta Mega Project with Chinese loans and a letter sent to China requesting funding. In September, Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen confirmed that a Chinese technical team would visit to assess the project for implementation
2026	Newly elected government led by PM Tarique Rahman with political commitment of implementing the project with the partnership of China.

Indeed, in 2016, the Bangladesh Water Development Board signed a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with POWERCHINA for a feasibility study of the project during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Bangladesh in September of that year [23]. In 2019, POWERCHINA submitted a comprehensive river management plan [24]. Afterwards, Bangladesh sent the Preliminary Development Project Proposal (PDPP) of the project to China in March 2021, through the Chinese Embassy, seeking a loan for its implementation. In 2022, Chinese Ambassador to Dhaka Li Jiming visited the Teesta River Project area [25]. The Sheikh Hasina government also officially maintained talks with the World Bank and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for the Teesta River Project, but China first expressed interest in funding the project, which estimated to cost $1 billion [26]. Although no official agreement signed with China, its interest in implementing the Teesta project marks an important turning point for Bangladesh. Since the solution to the Teesta river issue has been primarily limited to bilateral talks with India, but the proposed China-funded TRCMRP emerged as a probable alternative for Teesta River water management [7].

However, Bangladesh's potential engagement with China on the Teesta project began putting pressure on neighboring India, as it sent its foreign secretary, Vinay Mohan Kwatra, in 2024 to propose an alternative investment plan for the project. Indian government, through Kwatra offered Bangladesh government an Indian funding for the project [27]. Following a state visit to India in July 2024, Hasina expressed that she would prefer India to implement the project by stating, "China is ready to finance, but I want India to do the project. If India undertakes this project, they will continue to provide whatever is needed for it. That's the plain truth—no sugarcoating." [29]. However, no implementation of Sheikh Hasina's preference or any negotiation could progress due to the fall of her regime in August 2024. "The Hasina regime had a plan for the Teesta issue that was not fully explored due to the regime change," as stated by a government official in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh (Interview-10, June 11, 2025).

Following a mass uprising in July-August 2024, also known as the July uprising, there was significant shift in Bangladesh's domestic politics, the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India [30], and the government's policy regarding the Teesta River issue. An interim government formed, led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, who took office as Chief Advisor (CA) of the government on August 8, 2024. This governemnt's primary commitment was to hold free and fair elections after reforming the core institutions necessary for democracy in Bangladesh [31].

Regarding foreign policy, the interim government faced significant challenges, particularly in balancing the country's redefined ties with India. Where Sheikh Hasina's term of power marked a period of friendly diplomatic balancing with regional powers like India and China, there the post-Hasina government struggled to continue a cooperative relation with India [32]. In contrary, Bangladesh's relations with China in this period started to take a new direction. During the state visit to China in March 2025, CA Yunus of Bangladesh discussed the Teesta River Project with Chinese President Xi Jinping and welcomed Chinese companies to participate in its implementation. Following that, the BWDB and POWERCHINA signed a MoU to extend the feasibility test of the project [33]. In the Joint Press Release between the two countries, it was stated that, "The two sides agreed to strengthen cooperation in…. integrated management of water resources, water resources development, and related technology sharing. The Bangladeshi side welcomes Chinese companies to participate in the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TRCMRP)" [34]. Nevertheless, the interim government took a balancing stance regarding the Teesta policy during its period. It reflected by the statement of foreign affairs Advisor (Minister) of the government, that Bangladesh was ready to work with both India and China whichever side can provide good cooperation on the Teesta project, by stating, "We are open to this issue. It is possible to cooperate with both India and China. There is no obstacle with anyone. We will see which project will be easier for us to take up and work on it." [35]. The governemnt's planning adviser, further mentioned in April 2025 that the project's design is incomplete without the cooperation of India, stating,

Chinese financial assistance remains uncertain without an assessment of water availability from upstream India. Without an assessment of how much water will be available from the upstream, there remains much uncertainty in designing such a project; It has not yet been verified whether the water that will come

without India's cooperation will be a good project, and whether China will agree in principle if that project is implemented." [36]

However, during the period of the interim government (August 2024 to February 2026), neither any bilateral discussion held with India nor any visible progress made on this issue.

A a newly elected government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Prime Minister Tarique Rahman came in power in February 2026. As far BNP's Teesta policy is concerned, its leaderships repeatedly expressed a firm commitment for implementing the Teesta River Project (TRCMP). In February 2025, BNP organised a two-day program near the Teesta River, with a slogan "Jago Bahe, Teesta Bachai (Wake Up, Save the Teesta)", demanding a fair share of the Teesta River water for Bangladesh from India and quick implementation of the Teesta River Project. BNP's Chairman and current Prime Minister of Bangladesh Tarique Rahman stated during the program that "If the BNP is entrusted with governing the state with public support, we will prioritise and take all necessary steps to implement the Teesta Master Plan (Teesta River Project)'[51]. He reaffirmed his commitment on this issue during the election rallies right before the 13th national election in Bangladesh held in February 2026 [51]. Post-election events have further clarified the BNP government's intention to implement this Project. During Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman's visit to Beijing in May 2026, Bangladesh formally sought China's involvement and support for the TRCMRP project in bilateral talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. This event reflects Dhaka's growing willingness to engage China in the Teesta Project [62].

V. Factors Behind Bangladesh's Policy on Teesta River Project

5.1 Systemic Factors

5.1.1 Bangladesh's Power Asymmetry with India

The scope of a country's foreign policy is shaped first by its place in the international system, specifically by its relative material power [8]. India is an upper riparian country and shares an asymmetrical power relation with Bangladesh. The imbalance of power between upper and lower riparians plays a crucial role in determining control over water resources [37], which significantly impacted the previous negotiation process for the Teesta river water shating issue. It has been particularly characterized as India's deliberate pursuit of a 'non-decision making' approach due to limited bargaining power of Bangladesh [57]. Apparently, the power asymmetry played as a systemic constraint for Bangladesh to reach an agreement with India for having a water sharing treaty on the transboundary Teesta River. In fact, for Bangladesh, any agreement on water sharing from the Teesta River hinges on India's goodwill (Professor of History, interviewee 1, June 16, 2025). With no bilateral agreement reached for decades, Bangladesh compelled to pursue alternative approach to managing the Teesta River water crisis, as continued reliance on India's goodwill or its domestic political situation for the long-stalled Teesta water-sharing agreement was no longer an option (Former Bangladesh High to India, interviewee 5, May 6, 2025). The leadership of the Bangladesh government thus opted to plan the project for the Teesta river issue and signed MoU with PowerChina for a feasibility test in 2016. Evidently, Bangladesh's initiative of planning the Teesta River Project was in response of the to the power asymmetry with India in transboundary water negotiation.

5.1.2 China's BRI as a systemic opportunity

Neoclassical realism argues that states respond to systemic opportunities (shift in distribution of power, alternative partnership or alliance), which are intervened by domestic factors, political regimes, and leadership perceptions [19]. Bangladesh's engagement with China to conduct a feasibility study and invest in Teesta River Project was significant. Some scholars believe that Dhaka invited China to engage in the project to leverage China's regional influence and geopolitical venture, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in which Bangladesh has also been a part since 2016 [63]. China has been Bangladesh's largest trading partner during the Sheikh Hasina regime (2009-2024) (See Figure-2), and it was increasingly recognized as the most trustworthy development partner of Bangladesh, as stated by Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen in 2025 [39]. Bangladesh had also significantly strengthened its strategic cooperation with China, while providing full support to the BRI projects in the country [40]. Therefore, China's long-standing development engagement with Bangladesh, under Bangladesh's affiliation with BRI, made China a suitable option within systemic opportunities of Bangladesh to engage with for implementing the tentative Teesta River Project. The leadership of Bangladesh, during Sheikh Hasina's regime effectively leveraged this opportunity.

5.1.3 Sino-Indian Geopolitics as Systemic Constraint

Although the plan of Teesta River Project presented an alternative opportunity for Bangladesh in context of transboundary water management of Teesta River, it initially faced challenge due to the Sino-Indian geopolitical rivalry in the region. It arose due to India's geopolitical sensitivity of the Siliguri corridor, which is closer to the tentative Teesta River Project area (Former Bangladesh High to India, interviewee 5, May 6, 2025) (See figure-1). Siliguri Corridor, most commonly refers to India's Chicken's neck, is arguably one of the most critical geopolitically sensitive area for India. This 27-kilometer narrow strip of land in West Bengal state that connects the seven northeastern states of India to the rest of the country [42]. The northeastern region of India shares a border with China, which is a part of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China. The two neighbors have a historical rivalry resulted in several military standoffs in the LAC region— in 1959 at the Tibet Border, in 1962 war at the borders of Arunachal province, in 1967 at Nathu La pass of Sikkim, in 1975 at Tulung La pass of Arunachal, in 1986-1987 at Sumdorong Chu Valley of Arunachal, including in 2017 at Doklam. Moreover, China has been claiming the Indian northeastern province, Arunachal Province, as its territory since the first Indo-China war in 1962. March 15, 2024, was the last time the Chinese Ministry of Defence reiterated this position, referring to Arunachal Pradesh as an "inherent part" of China[41]. This highlights the vulnerability and strategic importance of the Siliguri corridor as any disruption to this route poses a direct threat to India's territorial integrity[43]. From the Indian point of view, engagement of China in the Teesta project seen as a security concern and an opportunity for China to gain an advantage over its regional rival[44].

India has been dominated the South Asia region for a long time, but China's rise and growing influence in South Asian countries have altered the dynamics, making Indian policymakers perceive China as their primary rival for dominance in the region [45]. Bangladesh has been a crucial arena within this

competition as Hossain and Islam [46] noted that 'Sino-Indian rivalry brings about several significant issues and concerns for Bangladesh,…(Particularly) When China deepens its security cooperation with Bangladesh, India also wants to accelerate its security cooperation with the country. This has become particularly visible in recent years. The reflection of the pattern of such Indian response evident in some of the previous potential China-funded projects in Bangladesh, where India reportedly responded proactively to counter China's influence in Bangladesh. For example, in 2016, China agreed to develop 27 projects in Bangladesh, including the country's second-largest seaport renovation project at Mongla. As the commitment to fund the project came in December 2022, just days after India sent its envoy for a parallel project at the same port. Although the Port Authority claims the two projects differ, the timing of successive announcements hints at the Sino-Indian geopolitical competition in Bangladesh [47]. Earlier, Bangladesh cancelled China's proposal to build the 'Sonadia deep-sea port' at the Bay of Bengal, officially mentioning environmental concerns over it. However, the decision closely followed by India's objections to China's growing maritime presence in the Bay of Bengal. Therefore, Dhaka instead advanced the 'Matarbari port' with Japan and the 'Payra port' with India and other countries, further demonstrating a significant impact of regional geopolitics on Bangladesh's foreign policy [45-6-47]. This pattern of India's response aimed at counterbalancing China further reflected in its showed interest in financing the Teesta River project, following Chinese signaling to finance it [48]. This is because India perceive a growing Chinese presence in Bangladesh's development initiatives as a potential to reduce Bangladesh's dependency on India, that challenge India's dominance in the region [6](Thus, the Bangladesh government had been faced a dilemma between China and India over balancing economic, geopolitical, and geostrategic interests[46] (Hossain & Islam, 2021). From an NCR perspective, India's counter-response demonstrates to Teesta River Project evidently became a systemic constraint for Bangladesh to opt for a China-funded Teesta project (Professor of International Relations, interviewee 7, July 17, 2025). Bangladesh's strategic position also faces challenge to be able to sideline the strategic concern of India due to geographical position and power asymmetry with India (Former Official of Bangladesh High Commission to India, interviewee 9, June 17, 2025).

5.2 Domestic Factor

5.2.1 Hasina Regime

A leader's perspective and preference that shape the decision-making clearly reflected while the initiation of plan for the Teesta River Project during the Sheikh Hasina regime. In particular, the Hasina government's move to approaching China in the Teesta River Project regarded as a strategic move by scholars on the Teesta River issue. According to a Bangladeshi think tank Chair,

"Knowing the geopolitical sensitivity of India and China, approaching China for investing on the Teesta project, despite having other development alternative partners like JiCA (Japan), World Bank, or ADB—might be a strategic move of the Hasina government to shift the dynamics long-stalled Teesta river water issue with India in a new direction" (Interviewee 6, June 12, 2025).

Since, Bangladesh's engagement with China through BRI possessed systemic opportunity to engage with China for the project; the leadership of Bangladesh facilitate it. However, some argue that Chinese interest on Teesta River Project reflect and attempt to expand its presence in Bangladesh through development projects in strategic locations [47]. In contrast, others emphasized that the initiative originated as decision of Bangladeshi leadership where China's involvement is primarily financial and technical [38]. Similarly, a former ambassador of Bangladesh to China stated that, "The Bangladesh government invited China to invest in the Teesta project; it was not China who came forward first due to Chinese geopolitical interest" (Interviewee 2, June 12, 2025). Therefore, the domestic leadership's role became evident during the initiation of a plan for the Teesta River issue, which added a new dimension in the matter.

When both China and India's interest for investment arose in 2024, the challenge for Bangladesh's leadership was balancing these options while safeguarding its national interest and investment priorities. It was regarded as a diplomatic dilemma [27] as India's geopolitical rivalry with China played a systemic factor that put challenge in Bangladesh's maneuvering on this issue (Professor of International Relations, personal interview, May 13, 2025). In July in the same year, Bangladesh PM Hasina announced in a press conference that she would prefer India to implement the project.

However, no further negotiation or implementation of her preference could progress due to the fall of her regime in August as the same year. Nevertheless, this reflected Hasina government's potential inclination to India-backed Teesta project where her leadership preference played key role to navigate systemic constraint like power asymmetry with India and Sino-Indian geopolitics associated with the matter.

5.2.2 Post-Hasina Government

The post-Hasina government followed by the interim government led by Yunus and newly elected government of PM Tarique Rahman.

The interim government's leadership took a balancing stance regarding the 'Teesta River Project' issue during its period. It caused by leadership perception of CA Muhammad Yunus and particularly due to transitional status, and lack of democratic legitimacy of the interim government.

Yunus period witnessed a complicated the bilateral dynamic between Bangladesh and the government considered as being 'unfavorable' to India's interests in Bangladesh [49]. CA Yunus took a position on the Teesta issue in September 2024 as he stated that his government would pursue ways with India to resolve the Teesta water sharing conflict, emphasizing the necessity to uphold international norms for Bangladesh's water right as a lower riparian country [50]. The government's advisors (Ministers) further expressed the government's inclination to cooperate with India on both the Teesta water-sharing treaty and the Teesta River Project, although no progress made in reality within their period.

At the same time, the Yunus government also engaged with China for the project despite the systemic constraint like Sino-Indian rivalry, with India concerned about a China-funded Teesta project near its border. Indeed, the government intended to keeping the dynamics alive' by discussing with China a strategic signal to India, aiming for any reasonable outcome out of it through diplomacy (Professor of International Relations, personal interview, June 14, 2025). Thus, unlike Sheikh Hasina government, the interim government leadership took different approach in dealing with the Teesta River Project.

Although interim government welcomed Chinese companies for the project and signed a MoU with China for a further feasibility test, at the domestic level, the feasibility and effectiveness of the China-led Teesta River Project started to view with caution by its leadership and policy makers of the government, which reflected in their statements.

Most importantly, the interim government was a non-political government which actions and foreign policy was not a determinant, as their decision of the Teesta River Project would not reflect the long-term foreign policy of Bangladesh that be reshaped after a political government takeover (A Research Fellow, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh, personal interview, June 21, 2025). Since centralization of government's power and mobilization and extraction capacity identified as crucial domestic variables that affect a government's ability to take vital foreign policy decisions [16], such a significant strategic decision on Teesta River Project by the interim government regarding the Teesta River issue was unlikely. As a result, no visible progress like negotiation or policy implementation made within their period, rather than keeping a balancing stance.

The newly elected BNP government led by PM Tarique Rahman signaling toward a China funded Teesta project, evidently reflect the intervention of domestic factors like regime and leadership's perception and align with NCR argument that foreign policy behavior varies under similar systemic conditions with different domestic variables.

VI. Future of the Teesta River Project in Transboundary Teesta River Water Management

Since a complete feasibility-study and environmental assessment yet to be conduct to determine whether the implementation of the Teesta Project would require a water sharing agreement with India for dry season or not. It is also undetermined whether the project's primary objective (harvesting surplus water from the upper Teesta during the dry season) truly can effectively achieved without any cooperation with India. Scholar, experts and interviewed individuals often argued that without a water-sharing agreement with India, the project would not provide any additional water during the dry season, as the water-holding capacity of the planned project's dredged channels would be insufficient during major floods. Moreover, an overemphasis on Teesta's downstream water management might inadvertently shift focus away from the essential need to negotiate a water sharing agreement with upper riparian India. Most importantly, Bangladesh shares 54 of 57 transboundary rivers with India, creating a dependency on India's upstream water flow[28]. Furthermore, the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty, a 30-year agreement between India and Bangladesh signed in 1996, which is due for renewal in 2026 [54], also requires India's cooperation.

Looking forward, and based of the NCR analyses of the 'Teesta River Project' issue, this research suggests some plausible trajectories depending on how domestic factors in Bangladesh may evolve on this issue. As domestic leadership has been key factor in shaping the trajectory of the foreign policy behavior in this issue, Bangladesh's new leadership might go for a China-funded project that would face structural constraint imposed by Sino-Indian rivalry, power asymmetry with India and Bangladesh's upstream 54-river water dependency on India. This, however, could follow negotiation with both of the countries by Bangladesh. Scholars and former policy makers of Bangladesh and India also argue that a China-financed Teesta project has no geopolitical concern for India if Bangladesh implements it with transparency and cooperation (Former Ambassador of Bangladesh to China, Interviewee 2, June 12, 2025). Dr. Sriradha Dutta also believes that there are no obstacles for India and China to collaborate on the Teesta master plan [38].

Second, due to challenges associated with the issue, Bangladesh may pursue alternative pathway to break out of the India-China binary altogether. The government would explore engaging technically proficient third-party countries and multilateral development institutions that can finance or implement it. For example, country like the Netherlands, advanced in hydro-technologies, particularly engaged in Bangladesh's Delta Plan 2100 for flood control and water management.[55] Multilateral financing institutions such as the Asian Development Bank or the World Bank could also be an option to provide financial architecture for the project.

Third, a huge investment in the proposed project area do not possess any soon to return of investment possibility (Professor of Public Administration, interviewee 3, May 6, 2025). Besides, shrinking the width of the river might also be environmentally counter-productive [1]. In this context, there might be a continued political uncertainty regarding the project that would turn into a different posture by Bangladesh government. The government might opt for initiating further negotiation for the Teesta River water sharing treaty with India. There also can be a dual approach by focusing both on negotiation with India on the treaty and on the implementation of the project with China.

VII. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clearthat the long stalled bilateral Teesta water-sharing treaty with asymmetrical power relation between Bangladesh and India led the leadership of Bangladesh to initiate the Teesta River Project as a potential alternative response. Bangladesh's strong partnership with China and the Belt and China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provided a potential pathway to address the water crisis independent of Indian cooperation. Bangladesh's decision on the issue is substantially influenced systemic factor like Sino-Indian geopolitics. This however differ in perception of leadership in Bangladesh—where Hasina government potentially inclined to India-backed Teesta project, the interim government maintained a balance between India and China due to its transitional nature and lack of democratic mandate. The BNP government, on the contrary, shows its intention to implement the Project with Chinese partnership. However, future trajectories depend on how domestic factors in Bangladesh maneuver the issue until the end.

The limitations of this research lies on the development of the diplomatic events on Teesta Project issue. Due to regime change in 2024 the Hasina regime's diplomatic approach regarding the Teesta River Project could not explored fully. Besides, due to a transitional status of Bangladesh's interim government, diplomacy regarding the issue although undergone some developed but resulted in no visible outcome with time. There is also very limited government information and scarcity of research on the Teesta River Project issue. Since the issue expected to be an important factor in future negotiations and policy implications for the transboundary Teesta water sharing issue, there would be immense opportunity to delve into different perspectives of the matter for broader analyses.

Nevertheless, while Teesta River Project represents a potential alternative to resolve the Teesta river water crisis, Bangladesh government's policy regarding the project's trajectory although constrained by Sino-Indian geopolitics, ultimately render on leadership's domestic political will and a well-calculated foreign policy course.

Declarations

Ethical Approval and accordance

Ethical considerations carefully ensured throughout the interview process and research according to the relevant guidelines approved by the 'RUIR Graduate Committee' in accordance with the regulations set forth by the 'BSS Research Guidelines' by Department of International Relations, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh. As it was universal of all student who engaged with the research, no formal protocol number provided along with it.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation in the study. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and provided their consent to participate in the interviews. Participation was voluntary and could withdraw at any time without explanation.

Consent to publish

Verbal informed consent for publication of anonymized interview data was obtained from all participants. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study, with only professional titles disclosed where relevant.

Clinical trial number

Not applicable.

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Author Contribution

The author himself has collected and reviewed the literature, conducted interviews, transcribed and analyzed the data, and prepared the draft.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Figures



Figure 1

Geographical Position of the tentative Teesta River project (TRCMRP); Source: Author