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# Water Security in the Himalayan Region: Navigating Opportunities for Joint Prosperity and Conflict Prevention

High-Level Roundtable Dialogue Report  
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# Water Security in the Himalayan Region: Navigating Opportunities for Joint Prosperity and Conflict Prevention

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## The Global Challenge of Water Security

Water scarcity and insecurity are poised to become defining global issues in the 21st century. Two of the world's economic powerhouses, India and China, demand increasing amounts of water and water-intensive products for agricultural, energy and industrial purposes. As a result, these and other countries are driven to tap into shared water resources—rivers, lakes and watersheds—that flow across national borders, often between competitive or adversarial neighbors. In the absence of cooperative resource management agreements, intensified zero-sum competition over increasingly scarce and strategic water resources will continue to exacerbate tensions between riparian neighbors. To date, efforts towards “hydrodiplomacy” have largely been inadequate in addressing the widening gap between growing demand and dwindling supply, and ineffectual in curbing

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rampant hydropower construction, haphazard industrial use and unilateral diversion of watercourses.

This scenario is especially pronounced in the lands abutting the Himalayan mountain range, the aptly designated “water tower of Asia,” from which flows the majority of the continent's great rivers, including the Indus, Ganges, Tsangpo-Brahmaputra and myriad smaller tributaries and streams. These river systems flow from the peaks, plateaus and glaciers of the Himalayas to sustain an approximate 1.9 billion people, nearly one fourth of the entire global population. However, rapidly growing populations, sharply rising economic and agricultural demands and climate change have greatly intensified water stress throughout the Himalayan region.

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water security—especially between China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, the key players in Himalayan hydropolitics. To this end, consensus-driven, candid and multilateral dialogue is imperative to proactively mitigate the trends of conflict and competition in the Himalayan region.

## Terminology

The primary step toward engaging international water security issues is clearly defining the often nebulous terminology—a key challenge present in any multilateral discussion on the subject. To this end, the dialogue began with establishing working definitions of water scarcity, water security and hydrodiplomacy.

Water scarcity and security, while on the surface two seemingly simple terms, proved a catalyst for much of the ensuing discussion. Water scarcity is defined as a condition arising from an imbalance between scarce supply

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and the rising demands of growing populations. Meanwhile, per the United-Nations-proposed definition, water security is “the capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of and acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods, human well-being, and socio-economic development, for ensuring protection against water-borne pollution and water-related disasters, and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability.”

Importantly, water security ought not to be considered a monolithic concept, confined solely to national borders, but grounded, localized and specific to an international river basin—the most accurate level of analysis of transboundary water issues. Examining each requires accounting for unique variables, from the hydrological and climatic to the ecological and socio-economic, to determine whether a basin is free of scarcity and is secure in water resources. Water security and scarcity

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can assume a national, state and local character, extending even to the household level. Special consideration for the humanitarian aspect is also essential, given that water scarcity most adversely impacts the livelihoods and living standards of the region's population.

Recognizing that international cooperation and regional stability lie at the crux of mitigating the impact of scarcity and consolidating water security, hydrodiplomacy comprises the interaction between geopolitics and national sovereignty, as well as diplomacy and collective action concerning the equitable allocation, sustainable management and use of transboundary water resources.

## Hydrodiplomacy and Geopolitics

Transboundary water resource politics is often dictated by power asymmetries and competition over scarce shared resources, which frequently leads to national security concerns. Albeit water challenges alone have not been the sole motivation behind regional or international conflict, but against the backdrop of the often tense geopolitical situation among the countries of the Himalayan region, water scarcity has become a highly securitized notion with the potential to exacerbate existing challenges and instability. Moreover, the Himalayan region's accelerating population growth coupled with rising climate change risks have made timely and effective discussion on cross-border

hydropolitical interactions an even greater imperative.

Participants posited that while environmental issues are indeed an element within geopolitical issues, the question of hydrodiplomacy itself should be studied in isolation from that of geopolitics as the latter has the potential to misinform decision making. Rather, hydrodiplomacy and subsequent policy formulation should be approached according to a more holistic view of each river basin, the relevant ecosystem and the population in context. One expert highlighted that regional cooperation on water resources has been a victim of an overall underinvestment in diplomacy in South Asian geopolitics. The absence of political will and the bureaucratic nature of resource sharing agreements serve as key obstacles towards transboundary cooperation. For example, although often touted as a breakthrough in hydrodiplomacy, the Indus Waters Treaty between India and Pakistan still needs significant revisions—often constrained by bilateral disputes and resistance to reform.

A discussant argued that prior to classifying the Himalayan region as “water scarce” it is important to first fully comprehend the concept of water scarcity. The discussant further elaborated that water scarcity is not reflective of a country's or region's economic welfare and GDP growth, rather it is contingent on the perennial gap between the supply and demand of available water resources. The real essence of hydrodiplomacy lies in fostering transboundary

cooperation vis-à-vis enabling more effective institutional architecture, namely bilateral and multilateral water sharing mechanisms and agreements. These, in turn, promote technological and financial capacity and confidence building in shared river basins.

## Water Resource Governance and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

Key to addressing water scarcity issues is the interplay between all the various actors and interests vested in the utilization of transboundary water resources. However, in pursuit of a working definition, participants agreed that, at a basic level, these stakeholders comprise the various parties, ranging from policy makers at the township, state and national levels to the private sector—and ideally households—all of which generate demand for water resources and maintain an interest in a secure supply. It was further emphasized that fostering partnership opportunities among these disparate stakeholder entities and groups is crucial to engendering the requisite governance frameworks for effective action on regional water scarcity. In recognition of this, the experts agreed that cooperative efforts must first address two key challenges: first, to identify stakeholders and incentivize them to play an active part in multilateral organizations and regional forums, where multi-stakeholder partnership may be cultivated, and second, to determine how to best ensure

ecological and environmental interests are accounted and advocated for in stakeholder dialogues.

As mentioned above, experts agreed that gauging the variety of political and economic systems in the region and the “facts on the ground” within each river basin would provide a clearer picture as to the array of local stakeholders and the corrective actions that must be undertaken. In order to deliver on governance goals, the panelists unanimously emphasized the need for a more multi-disciplinary approach to water security in the region. That is to say, regional dialogue must take into account the correlation between scientific understanding of the prevalent water scarcity and its influence on the region’s ecosystem, agriculture and social structure. Engaging scientific perspectives and improving access to and the availability of accurate hydrological data for all concerned will enable more effective water sharing as well as more adequate planning of resources given the interdependencies among the food, water and energy sectors.

In addition, one expert called for an often overlooked group to be included among stakeholders, namely media representatives. Given that the narratives surrounding water security often lack factual grounding and are rife with misinformation and sensationalism, media outlets have an increasingly important role in promoting responsible resource governance.

The participants agreed that there is no universal set of stakeholders discussing transboundary water governance and that different river basins will necessitate a specific set of stakeholders. As to primary actions necessary to developing multi-stakeholder partnerships, one

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discussant proposed greater cross-border interactions among academics and civil society actors in particular, with government representatives joining in a purely observational role.

## Takeaways

Regional policymaking must increasingly prioritize hydrodiplomacy in order to best foster peace and security among the key stakeholders in the Himalayan region. The following highlights the key takeaways and recommendations stemming from the roundtable dialogue:

- The concept of hydrodiplomacy must be separated from that of geopolitics; treating transboundary water resources as a strategic element of geopolitics has historically proven to impede cooperative breakthroughs.
- Scientific perspectives of multiple disciplines—ranging from hydrology to ecology—and the interaction between humanitarian and environmental factors must be at the forefront of all future dialogues so as to provide a more holistic assessment of water resource policy and governance.
- Inter-governmental transboundary water resource cooperation frameworks and dialogues must invite greater participation from and interaction between business leaders, media representatives, civil society actors and local subsistence and smallholder farmers.
- Discussion on water resource governance must account for the crucial nature of the food-water-energy nexus, as the interdependencies between these three sectors are integral to the effective management and sustainability of water resources.



## About the Dialogue



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On October 21, 2019, the EastWest Institute (EWI), together with the Multinational Development Policy Dialogue of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), convened a high-level roundtable dialogue in Brussels, concerning international water security.

The dialogue, the first in the project series, brought together distinguished experts representing both the public and private sectors in China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and the European Union to assess the risks and threats to water security and gauge opportunities for future cooperation between co-riparian states in the Himalayan region. The roundtable dialogue consisted of two panels: “Rethinking Hydrodiplomacy in an Uncertain Geopolitical Future,” moderated by **Ms. Kitty Pilgrim**, international journalist and former CNN correspondent, and “Effective Water Resource Governance through Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships,”

moderated by **Dr. Peter Hefele**, head of the Asia and Pacific team of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS).

### Experts

**Dr. Nilanjan Ghosh**, Director, Kolkata Chapter, Observer Research Foundation

**Mr. Dipak Gyawali**, former Minister of Water Resources of Nepal

**Mr. Ikram Sehgal**, Chairman, Pathfinder Group; former Chairman, Karachi Electric

**Ms. Carmen Marques Ruiz**, Policy Officer for Environment and Water, European External Action Service

**Dr. Hu Yuandong**, former Chief Representative, Investment and Technology Promotion Office for China, United Nations Industrial Development Organization

**Dr. Jayanta Bandyopadhyay**, Visiting Distinguished Fellow, Observer Research Foundation

**Dr. Khondaker Azharul Haq**, Chairperson, Global Water Partnership South Asia

### Acknowledgements

EWI, with the support of its partners, will continue to mobilize and engage key experts, policy makers and stakeholders in timely and discreet dialogue on the most pressing challenges of international water insecurity.

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