Dams in China

Part of: GS-II- International relations (PT-MAINS-PERSONALITY TEST)

Recently, a US-funded study has highlighted the possible impact of China’s dams on the Mekong river (known as Lancang river in China) and countries downstream. The study was published by the Sustainable Infrastructure Partnership in Bangkok and the Lower Mekong Initiative. The Lower Mekong Initiative is a US partnership with all the downstream countries of Mekong besides Myanmar. The Mekong flows from China to Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Important Points

- Key Findings of the Study
  - It also raised questions on other Chinese dams on rivers which originate in China like Brahmaputra and their similar impact on neighbouring countries like India.
  - China’s southwestern Yunnan province had above-average rainfall from May to October 2019. However, there was severe lack of water in the lower Mekong in 2019 in comparison to 1992, based on satellite data.
  - The Mekong River Commission has emphasised on the need of more scientific evidence to establish whether dams caused a 2019 drought.
    - The Mekong River Commission comprises of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam,
  - According to the study, six dams built since the commissioning of the Nuozhadu dam in 2012 had altered the natural flow of the river.

China’s Stand

It has called the study groundless and highlighted the drought faced by Yunnan because Lancang only accounts for 13.5% of Mekong’s flows. China has maintained that the dams, it is building, are run of the river dams which store water for power generation.

India’s Stand

According to Indian experts, the study is not conclusive because it only considers the water flowing into the lower basin at one station in Thailand. It did not consider other dams and water-use along the course of the river. The lower basin is not entirely dependent on flows from China, but also receives water from tributaries in all other countries it flows in, which the study did not account for.

India’s Other Concerns

India has been expressing concerns on Brahmaputra since 2015 when China operationalised its first hydropower project at Zangmu. Currently, three other dams at Dagu, Jiexu and Jiacha are being developed.

For India, quantity of water is not an issue because these are run of the river dams and will not impact the Brahmaputra flow.
More importantly, Brahmaputra is not entirely dependent on upstream flows and an estimated 35% of its basin is in India.

However, India is concerned about the Chinese activities affecting the quality of water, ecological balance and the flood management. India and China do not have a water sharing agreement. Both nations share hydrological data so it becomes important to share genuine data and have continuous dialogue on issues like warning of droughts, floods and high water discharges.