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Unquiet flows the Helmand

By SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN,

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On April 19, Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, inaugurated work on Phase III of the Kamal Khan Dam. The dam, which straddles the Helmand River about 85 kilometers from Zaranj city in Afghanistan's Nimroz province, is expected to irrigate 100,000 acres of land and generate 10mw of electricity once completed.

Construction of the Kamal Khan Dam began in 1996 but was suspended due to the civil war. Work on the project was subsequently resumed in 2011 but Kabul has been under pressure from Iran to halt the project. The Helmand River basin already has several dams, including the Kajaki, Grishk and Dahla dams. The Iranians fear that the Kamal Khan Dam would further restrict the availability of water for Iran.

Dam impact

The Helmand River, which flows from Afghanistan into Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province, sustains the Hamoun wetlands. Reduced water flow would have a disastrous impact on the wetland ecology and the economy it supports.

Building dams is an important part of Ghani's strategy to jump-start agriculture and industry in the war-ravaged country

This was evident in the 1998-2001 period, for instance, when the Taliban authorities closed the sluices of the Kajaki Dam on the Helmand River. The amount of water flowing into Iran plunged, compounding the impact of a severe drought in the region at the time. It turned the wetlands into a dustbowl. Fishing and other water-related livelihoods were not possible any longer. It forced a mass outmigration from the Sistan-Baluchistan province.

Would the damming of the Helmand doom the Sistan-Baluchistan's wetlands to gradual desertification?

In addition to the Helmand River, Iran and Afghanistan are feuding over the waters of the Harirud River as well. Iran opposed the building of the Afghan-India Friendship Dam across the Harirud River, as it is expected to reduce water flow into Iran by 73%. Tehran did its utmost to stall the dam's completion. It used diplomatic means to convince India, which constructed the dam, to withdraw from the project. But also, it used force. Iran reportedly used Taliban militants and local warlords to target workers on the dam project.

It is said to be using Taliban militants to sabotage work on the Kamal Khan Dam too.

Insurgency-wracked

Sistan-Baluchistan province, which is Shiite Iran's only Sunni-majority province, has been wracked by an insurgency for several years now. Economic devastation caused by Afghanistan's damming of the Helmand River would exacerbate the unrest there. This is a scenario that Iran would like to avoid at any cost. This underlies its courting of the Taliban to halt the Kamal Khan Dam's completion. But the strategy is fraught with risk. Tehran's support for the Taliban would enable the latter to establish sanctuaries in Sistan-Baluchistan province. The possibility of this fuelling violence in restive Sistan-Baluchistan province cannot be ruled out.

Building dams is an important part of Ghani's strategy to jump-start agriculture and industry in the war-ravaged country. He has proposed building 21 small and medium-sized dams on Afghanistan's rivers.

Dams on Afghanistan's transboundary rivers will have implications for the lower riparian countries. Understandably, its neighbors are worried.

Afghanistan's water conflicts with its neighbors are complicated by the fact that it does not have agreements with them on the sharing of waters of any of its transboundary rivers. The only exception is the Helmand River.

In 1973, Iran and Afghanistan did reach an agreement on the sharing of the Helmand's waters that required Kabul to release 850 million cubic meters of water annually from the Helmand River basin to Iran. But that agreement was stillborn. It was never ratified and was all but forgotten thanks to the political unrest and violent conflict that roiled the two countries for decades thereafter.

While some suggest that the 1973 agreement should be revived, many believe that the pact is outdated. Experts say that it could serve as a useful template.

Afghanistan needs to sit down and discuss water sharing with its neighbors. It is reluctant to do so as it fears that its more powerful neighbors will push through agreements that favor them. A part of this reluctance stems from a lack of technical expertise and hydrological data. But these are shortcomings that can be addressed through training, improved data collection and capacity building.