

FLASHPOINTS

How Water Scarcity Could Fuel Another Sino-Indian War

A recent article lays out how water and geopolitics combine in Arunachal Pradesh.

By Francis P. Sempa

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The current issue of *Parameters*, the quarterly journal of the U.S. Army War College, includes an article by U.S. Army Col. Jin H. Pak on how water scarcity and the geopolitical struggle over the

Arunachal Pradesh could once again lead to war between the rising Asian powers of India and China.

Col. Pak is a graduate of West Point and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He has served both as a battalion commander and an assistant professor of international relations at West Point. His well-written 15-page article, including helpful maps, is intended to persuade his military and civilian leaders in the U.S. Defense Department "to elevate environmental security issues to a level on par with national security interests such as countering WMD proliferation and preventing attacks on the homeland."

Pak briefly describes the global water scarcity problem, noting that "[l]ess than 2.5 percent of all water on earth is fresh water, and more than half of it is trapped in polar ice and high-altitude glaciers around the world." He further notes that climate change, pollution, and increasing consumption have worsened the scarcity problem.

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Water scarcity affects more than four billion people, nearly half of whom live in China and India. A 2006 World Bank study claimed that China would soon "become the most water-stressed country in East and Southeast Asia."

The geopolitics of this water scarcity focuses on the Tibetan Plateau in the Himalayas, the source of Asia's ten river systems and commonly called the "Water Tower of Asia." The river systems affect 11 countries and more than two billion people in the southern, central, and southeastern parts of Asia. Pak notes that China's upstream geographical position gives it a "potential monopoly over the supply of fresh water" to the region. "China," he writes, "is the source of more transnational water flows than any other upstream



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Water scarcity, alone, Pak notes, will not likely lead to war. Instead, he claims, war is made more likely by a combination of factors, including: China's growing water scarcity; China's possible upstream water diversion activity; the long-standing Sino-Indian dispute over Arunachal Pradesh; and political instability within China.

China and India went to war over control of Arunachal Pradesh in 1962. China seized more than 20,000 square kilometers from India during that war. "Since then," Col. Pak explains, "the dispute over the Arunachal Pradesh remains a point of contention in Sino-Indian relations and serves as a potential trigger for renewed military conflict." The region has witnessed numerous border incursions and a steady military build-up on both sides. Pak calls this border area "an increasingly dangerous hotspot" between these two rising and nuclear-armed powers.

The ongoing border dispute is aggravated by India's fear that China may divert water from upstream portions of rivers, including the Yarlung Tsangpo River that becomes the Brahmaputra River across the border in India. The Brahmaputra River, according to Pak, accounts for nearly one-third of India's river surface water and more than 40 percent of India's hydropower potential.

China's water scarcity problem coincides with what Pak calls its "increasing political instability" due to a slowdown in the economy and "rising popular nationalism." Chinese President Xi Jinping, moreover, has consolidated political power during the economic slowdown, potentially placing further stress on political stability. Pak reports that the Chinese government annually faces tens of thousands of domestic protests, and the number is likely to increase as the economy slows. "As Chinese elites lose the ability to leverage economic growth to maintain legitimacy," Pak explains, "they will become more unwilling, or even unable, to control popular nationalism." China would not be the first nation in history to channel popular nationalism toward a foreign opponent to divert attention from domestic problems in an effort to maintain its political legitimacy.

Pak recommends that the United States promote vague "confidence-building measures" to lessen the tensions between China and India over water and Arunachal Pradesh. In the long run, however, it is up to the leaders of China and India to deal with the factors currently trending toward conflict in a way that lessens tensions and resolves disputes peacefully.

The full article can [be read here](#).

Francis P. Sempa is the author of Geopolitics: From the Cold War to the 21st Century and America's Global Role: Essays and Reviews on National Security, Geopolitics and War. He has written on historical and foreign policy topics for Orbis, Strategic Review, Joint Force Quarterly, The University Bookman, the Asian Review of Books, the New York Journal of Books, Presidential Studies Quarterly, the Claremont Review of Books, American Diplomacy, The Diplomat, and the Washington Times. He is an attorney, an adjunct professor of political science at Wilkes University, and a contributing editor to American Diplomacy.

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