



Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies



Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies

ISSUE BRIEF

13/26

13 October 2026

INDIA-CHINA TRANSBOUNDARY RIVER COOPERATION: CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

Mr Prahlad Kumar Singh

Research Associate, Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies



On August 25, 2026, India's National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval and China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi met in Beijing for the 25th round of Special Representatives (SR) talks. Wang Yi is not just the Foreign Minister. He also serves on the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and as Director of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs. The talks covered the boundary dispute, the wider bilateral relationship and regional trends.¹ Earlier that day, Doval also met with Chinese Vice President Han Zheng, who called for both countries to approach bilateral relations from a "strategic and long-term perspective," strengthen strategic mutual trust, expand cooperation, and manage differences properly.² The SR talk concluded with an eight-point consensus.

The eight-point consensus centres on the boundary issue, with several measures to strengthen border management and cooperation. Both sides agreed to continue negotiating a settlement framework based on the 2005 Agreement on "Political Parameters and Guiding Principles." They also agreed to pursue an "early and substantial harvest" in boundary delimitation, and use existing diplomatic and military channels to manage situations along the LAC (Line of Actual Control), while expanding border trade and communication.³

The eight-point consensus centres on the boundary issue, with several measures to strengthen border management and cooperation. Both sides agreed to continue negotiating a settlement framework based on the 2005 Agreement on "Political Parameters and Guiding Principles."

Looking at the steps taken by both countries over the past two years, the broader trend in the relationship appears to be gradual normalisation. Progress towards re-engagement has been made, though it was disrupted by the Glawan clash. Restrictions on trade and investment have been eased, direct flights have resumed, and top-level leadership communication has resumed. The 25th round of SR talks fits in this pattern of incremental progress. This progress is significant but does not resolve any existing disputes. Even in the consensus documents, both parties differ on priorities, interpretation, and the scope of the documents. To understand these nuances, this article focuses on transboundary river cooperation, which is central to flood forecasting, disaster preparedness, and risk mitigation, particularly in the Brahmaputra basin region. It examines existing cooperation mechanisms and their limitations, and proposes a possible way forward.

Trans-Border River Data Sharing Arrangements

India and China share several transboundary river basins, including the Brahmaputra and Sutlej. Yet the two countries have never negotiated a comprehensive water-sharing treaty. Instead, a series of separate, river-specific Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) covers the exchange of hydrological data during the flood season. This has given the relationship a working mechanism. Still, it does not address the larger questions: upstream construction, the frequency and scope of data sharing, and joint management of shared river systems as a whole.

The Brahmaputra/Yarlung Tsangpo River MoU

During Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji's visit to India in January 2002, the two countries signed an MoU to provide hydrological information on the Yaluzangbu/Brahmaputra River during the flood season. Under it, China agreed to share water level, discharge, and rainfall data twice daily from June 01 to October 15, drawn from three hydrological stations on the river's mainstream in China: Nugesha, Yangcun, and Nuxia.⁴

The Chinese side also committed to sharing data outside the flood season if water levels exceeded the agreed threshold, and to providing real-time information in the event of any sudden rise or fall in water levels or discharge. Basically, they agreed to pass on any signal that could point to an impending flood. The goal was simple. It gave India's downstream planners enough warning to respond.⁵ The MoU was renewed in 2008, 2013, and 2018. It lapsed on June 05, 2023, and data sharing for the Brahmaputra has been suspended since then.

The Sutlej/Langqen Zangbo River MoU

A parallel MoU on the Sutlej/Langqen Zangbo River was signed in 2005, during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to India, again aimed at flood mitigation. Under the MoU, China agreed to establish a hydrological station on the river; India agreed to bear the cost of data obtained from it. Data sharing was to begin from the 2006 flood season.⁶

This arrangement mattered directly for flood management in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. It was renewed twice, in 2010 and 2015, before lapsing in November 2020.⁷ China shared data in 2021, and nothing since.⁸

But the MoUs have already shown how fragile they are under pressure. During the 2017 Doklam standoff, China suspended hydrological data sharing on both rivers, citing technical reasons. China said that floods washed away the hydrological gathering sites.⁹ Sharing only resumed in 2018, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping met on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit. This episode is worth reflecting on, as it shows that these MOUs carry no legal weight and can be unilaterally suspended in a crisis, with no consequences for the side that does so.¹⁰

Expert Level-Mechanism (ELM)

In November 2006, India and China signed a Joint Declaration establishing the Joint Expert Level Mechanism (ELM) to discuss flood-season data exchange, emergency management, and other cross-border river issues. It grew out of the recognised success of the two earlier MOUs. The idea was to extend the model to other rivers.¹¹

Over time, the ELM has evolved into a regular meeting for India and China to discuss cross-border river issues. Discussions have included sharing flood-season hydrological data, emergency management, and other topics agreed upon by both sides. The discussions also provided an opportunity to evaluate existing arrangements and raise practical concerns about data transfer, flood management, and monitoring.¹² To date, there have been sixteen ELM meetings. The 16th ELM meeting was held in New Delhi on April 23 and April 24, 2025. ELM meetings are alternately held in China and India.¹³

Umbrella MoU on Strengthening Cooperation on Trans-Border Rivers

During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's October 2013 visit to China, both countries signed a broader MoU on "Strengthening Cooperation on Trans-border Rivers." Unlike earlier river-specific agreements, this one was meant to establish an overarching framework. Both parties underscored the importance of transboundary rivers to riparian nations' development and agreed to deepen cooperation through the existing ELM. One concrete result followed: from 2014, the Brahmaputra data-sharing window was extended, expediting the start date from June 01 to May 15 while keeping the October 15 end date. The MoU itself has no expiry and, on paper, leaves room for cooperation on future river-related issues. In practice, there has been no real activity under this framework since.¹⁴

Recent Progress

At the 24th SR level meeting in August 2025, China agreed to share "emergency hydrological information" with India on "humanitarian" grounds. The commitment was narrow, and most of the cooperation was left to be handled on a case-by-case basis.¹⁵

India kept pressing for more transparency at the working-level meetings. For example, at the 35th WMCC (Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination) meeting in May 2026, it asked for an early ELM meeting;¹⁶ it repeated the request at the 36th WMCC meeting in August, along with a specific ask for "technical details on upstream project."¹⁷ China's official statements after both meetings made no mention of transboundary river or upstream activity at all, a silence that is itself informative.¹⁸

At the 25th SR meeting, both sides finally agreed to hold the next ELM round in September and to "maintain communication" on hydrological data sharing and renewing lapsed MoUs. It is a significant step forward that the ELM is being revived and that data exchange and MoU renewal were even mentioned. It does not really address the more fundamental issue of ensuring transparency around upstream development.¹⁹

India's Concern over Upstream Projects

India's concern has never been limited to receiving hydrological data. It is about understanding what China is building upstream on the Brahmaputra and what that means

India's concern has never been limited to receiving hydrological data. It is about understanding what China is building upstream on the Brahmaputra and what that means for downstream water flow.

for downstream water flow. This has come up in nearly every round of talks between the two countries.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh raised the issue directly with Premier Li Keqiang during his May 2013 visit to India, ahead of the Umbrella MoU, and again with Xi Jinping at their first meeting on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Durban, South Africa, in March 2013. PM Singh's proposal was specific: fold information-sharing on upstream projects into the ELM's mandate, framed around a shared understanding of the "Himalayan ecosystem".^{20 21} At the time, India was pushing for transparency on roughly 39 project sites China had reportedly identified along the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, seven of them on the main river itself, including Zangmu, Jiexu, and Jiacha, which drew particular attention.²²

The disagreement here is fundamental, not procedural. India worries about downstream impact on millions of indigenous populations. China insists that the dams are run-of-the-river and downstream flow will not be affected. However, the existing MoUs were built to share basic flood-warning data, not to answer this kind of dispute. They give India no real visibility into upstream construction, and until those changes are made, the disagreement is likely to endure during all existing rounds of negotiation.

Way Forward

China is now moving ahead with the mega-dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo river, which has been described by Beijing as the "project of the century," which is being built only a few kilometres from the Indian border.²³ Its downstream consequences for water flow and the broader Himalayan environment will not be clear until China releases more technical details associated with the project. The recent flash floods in Nepal warn what is at stake. They showed how exposed Himalayan populations are, and how much timely information and preparedness

actually matter. In light of this, India's apprehension regarding the opacity of significant upstream projects is not merely a formality. It is becoming increasingly urgent.

A genuine water-sharing treaty, rather than a series of expiring MoUs, could give this relationship

China is now moving ahead with the mega-dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo river, which has been described by Beijing as the "project of the century,". Its downstream consequences for water flow and the broader Himalayan environment will not be clear until China releases more technical details associated with the project.

the assurance and predictability it currently lacks. Given the scale of what China is now building upstream, India and China need to move towards a properly institutionalised framework for jointly managing these rivers, one that puts the Himalayan ecology and the communities who depend on it at the centre, rather than treating data sharing as an ad hoc goodwill gesture.

Given the scale of what China is now building upstream, India and China need to move towards a properly institutionalised framework for jointly managing these rivers, one that puts the Himalayan ecology and the communities who depend on it at the centre, rather than treating data sharing as an ad hoc goodwill gesture.

Notes:

¹ “NSA Doval Wang Yi hold border talks in Beijing,” *The Hindu*, August 25, 2026, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nsa-doval-china-beijing-special-representatives-border-talks-wang-yi-han-zheng-august-25-2026/article71387500.ece>. Accessed on September 01, 2026.

² “Chinese Vice President Meets Indian National Security Advisor,” *Xinhuanet*, August, 25, 2026, <https://english.news.cn/20260825/9f8f4a79cfb84468a0da9cb8bdeca082/c.html>. Accessed on September 01, 2026.

³ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Eight Points of Outcomes and Consensus for the 25th Round of Talks between Special Representatives of India and China on the Boundary Question,” August 26, 2026, https://www.mea.gov.in/pressreleases?dtl/41700/Eight_Points_of_Outcomes_and_Consensus_for_the_25th_round_of_Talks_between_Special_Representatives_of_India_and_China_on_the_Boundary_Question. Accessed on September 01, 2026.

⁴ “MoU on Brahmaputra Data,” *The Times of India*, January 15, 2002, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/mou-on-brahmaputra-data/articleshow/501211010.cms>. Accessed on September 05, 2026.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Synopsis of Agreements/MOUs/Memoranda - Visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to India, April 9-12, 2005,” April 11, 2005, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents?dtl/6563/Synopses_of_AgreementsMOUsMemoranda_Visit_of_Chinese_Premier_Wen_Jiabao_to_India_April_912_2005. Accessed on September 05, 2026.

⁷ “Annual Data Sharing by China on Brahmaputra, Sutlej Rivers Begins,” *India Today*, June 01, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/annual-data-sharing-by-china-on-brahmaputra-sutlej-rivers-begins-1809723-2021-06-01>. Accessed on September 04, 2026.

⁸ Ashok Upadhyay, “Exclusive: China Hasn’t Shared River Data with India since 2022, RTI Query Reveals,” *India Today*, May 28, 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-has-not-shared-river-data-with-india-since-2022-rti-query-reveals-exclusive-2731993-2025-05-28>. Accessed on September 06, 2026.

⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Question No.278 Hydrological Data of Brahmaputra and Satluj Rivers,” March 14, 2018, https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha?dtl/29613/QUESTION_NO278_HYDROLOGICAL_DATA_OF_BRAHMAPUTRA_AND_SATLUJ_RIVERS. Accessed on September 06, 2026.

¹⁰ “China Agrees to Share Brahmaputra Data as Modi, Xi Meet during SCO Summit,” *The Print*, June 09, 2018, <https://theprint.in/india/governance/china-agrees-to-share-brahmaputra-data-as-modi-xi-meet-during-sco-summit/68320/>. Accessed on September 05, 2026.

¹¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Joint Declaration by the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China,” November 21, 2006, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents?dtl/6363/Joint_Declaration_by_the_Republic_of_India_and_the_Peoples_Republic_of_China. Accessed on September 05, 2026.

¹² P K Saxena and Teerath Singh Mehra, “Part II: India-China Cooperation In Water Resources: Expert-Level Mechanism,” *NatStrat*, March 18, 2025, <https://www.natstrat.org/articledetail/publications/india-china-cooperation-in-water-resources-expert-level-mechanism-188.html>. Accessed on September 05, 2026.

¹³ Embassy of India, Beijing, “India-China Brief,” March 18, 2025, <https://www.eoibeijing.gov.in/page/political-relations/>. Accessed on September 04, 2026.

¹⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Water Resources, the Republic of India and the Ministry of Water Resources, the People’s Republic of China on Strengthening Cooperation on Trans-Border Rivers,” October 23, 2013, https://www.mea.gov.in/all-media?dtl/22368/Memorandum_of_Understanding_between_the_Ministry_of_Water_Resources_the_Republic_of_India_and_the_Ministry_of_Water_Resources_the_Peoples_Republic_of_China_on_Strengthening_Cooperation_on_Transborder_Rivers. Accessed on September 05, 2026.

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “The Special Representatives on the China-India Boundary Question Reached a 10-Point Consensus,” August 20, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202508/t20250820_11692672.shtml. Accessed on September 05, 2026.

¹⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “35th Meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (May 27, 2026),” May 28, 2026, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases?dtl/41241/35th_Meeting_of_the_Working_Mechanism_for_Consultation__Coordination_on_IndiaChina_Border_Affairs_May_27_2026. Accessed on September 05, 2026.

¹⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “36th Meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (August 06, 2026),” August 07, 2026, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases?dtl/41635/36th_Meeting_of_the_Working_Mechanism_for_Consultation_and_Coordination_on_IndiaChina_Border_Affairs_August_06_2026. Accessed on September 06, 2026.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Press Release of the 36th Meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on China-India Border Affairs,” August 07, 2026, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/sjxw_674887/202608/t20260807_12000093.shtml. Accessed on September 06, 2026.

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Eight Points of Outcomes and Consensus for the 25th Round of Talks Between Special Representatives of China and India on the Boundary Question,” August 26, 2026, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202608/t20260826_12011002.html. Accessed on September 07, 2026.

²⁰ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, “Media Statement by Prime Minister during the State Visit of Chinese Premier H.E. Li Keqiang to India,” May 20, 2013, <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=96077®=48&lang=2>. Accessed on September 06, 2026.

²¹ “PM Manmohan Singh Meets Chinese President Xi Jinping, Raises Brahmaputra Issue,” *The Times of India*, March 28, 2013, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-manmohan-singh-meets-chinese-president-xi-jinping-raises-brahmaputra-issue/articleshow/19252963.cms>. Accessed on September 07, 2026.

²² Gargi Parsai, “India, China Renew Flood Data Pact on Brahmaputra,” *The Hindu*, May 20, 2013, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-china-renew-flood-data-pact-on-brahmaputra/article4732965.ece>. Accessed on September 07, 2026.

²³ Ananth Krishnan, “China to Proceed with Brahmaputra Mega Dam despite New Concerns,” *The Hindu*, September 06, 2026, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-to-proceed-with-brahmaputra-mega-dam-despite-new-concerns/article71432282.ece>. Accessed on September 10, 2026.



Centre for Aerospace Power
and Strategic Studies

The Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies (CAPSS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Marshal Nagesh Kapoor, SYSM PVSM, AVSM, VM (Retd).

Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies
P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010
Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

Formatting and Assistance: Ms Radhey Tambi, Ms Priyadarshini Baruah and Mr Rohit Singh

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.