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Chinese Involvement in Teesta River

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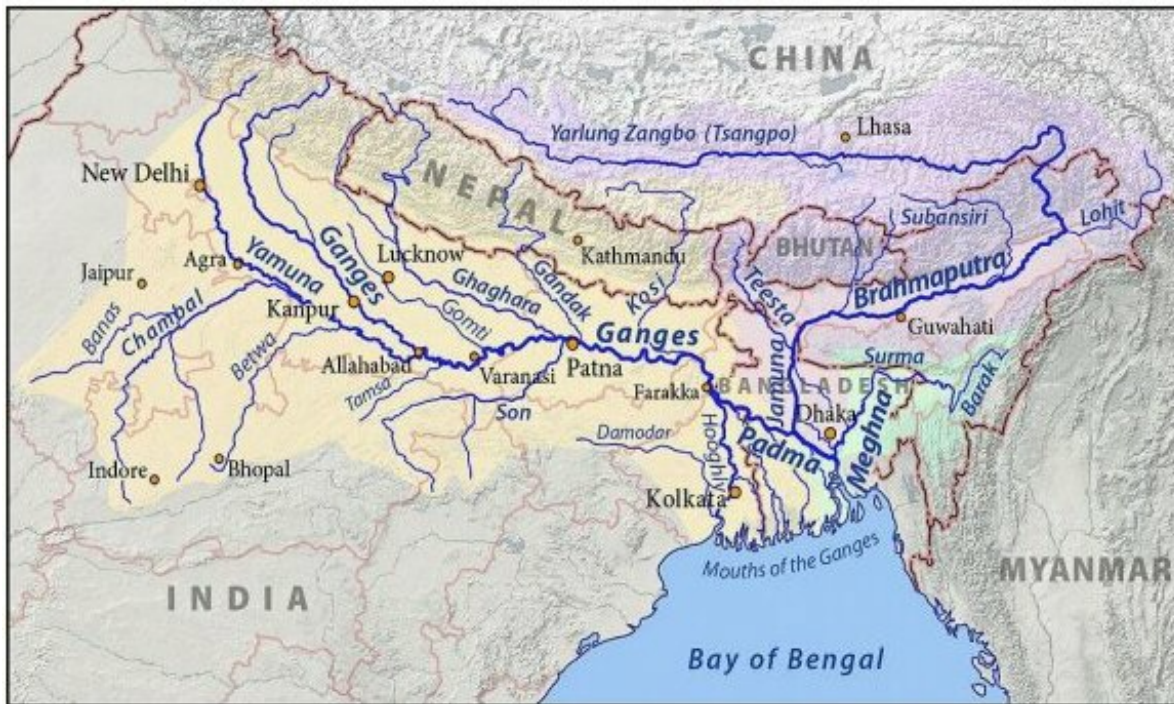
Why in News

Bangladesh is likely to receive **an almost USD 1 billion loan from China** for a comprehensive management and restoration **project on the Teesta river**.

The Teesta river water conflict is one of the most contentious issues between **India and Bangladesh** and the discussion comes amidst the ongoing **India-China standoff** in Ladakh.

Teesta River

- It is a **tributary of the Brahmaputra** (known as Jamuna in Bangladesh), flowing through India and Bangladesh.
- **Origin: In the Himalayas near Chunthang, Sikkim** and flows to the south through West Bengal before entering Bangladesh.
- **Drainage:** It covers nearly the entire floodplains of Sikkim while draining 2,800 sq km of Bangladesh. For West Bengal, it is the lifeline of half-a-dozen districts in North Bengal.
- **Latest Development:** In March 2020, the **Border Roads Organisation** (BRO) opened a 360 feet long bailey suspension bridge over Teesta river in Munshithang, Sikkim.



Key Points

- **About the Project:** The management and restoration project is **aimed at managing the river basin efficiently, controlling floods and tackling the water crisis** in Bangladesh in summers.
- **India-Bangladesh Teesta Dispute:**
 - Bangladesh sought a **fair and equitable distribution of Teesta waters** from India, on the lines of the **Ganga Water Treaty 1996**.
The treaty is an **agreement to share surface waters at the Farakka Barrage** near their mutual border.
 - In **2015**, the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Dhaka **generated expectations** to take forward the issue but it **still remains unresolved**.
 - In India, individual **states have significant influence over transboundary agreements**, impeding the policymaking process.
 - **West Bengal** is one of the key stakeholders of the Teesta agreement and **is yet to endorse the deal**.

Bangladesh-China Relations

- **China is the biggest trading partner of Bangladesh** and is the foremost source of imports with the trade heavily favouring China.
In 2019, the trade between the two countries was USD 18 billion.
- China **declared zero duty on 97% of imports from Bangladesh** recently and the move has been widely **welcomed in Bangladesh**.
The concession comes from **China's duty-free, quota-free programme for the least developed countries**.

- China has promised around **USD 30 billion worth of financial assistance** to Bangladesh.
- China is the **biggest arms supplier to Bangladesh** which has been a **matter of legacy**, strengthening the defence ties.
 - After the **liberation of Bangladesh in 1971**, officers of the Pakistan Army joined the Bangladesh Army and preferred Chinese weapons because they were **well-versed with them**.
 - As a result, **Bangladesh forces are equipped with Chinese arms** including tanks, missile launchers, fighter aircraft and several weapons systems.

India-Bangladesh Relations

- Both countries enjoy a **robust relationship with each other carefully cultivated since 2008**, especially with the Sheikh Hasina government.
- Bangladesh's **crackdown against anti-India outfits** has helped the Indian government **maintain peace in the eastern and Northeast states**.
- Bangladesh is **India's biggest trade partner in South Asia** and the economic and development partnership has benefitted it.

In 2018-19, India's exports and imports with Bangladesh stood at USD 9.21 billion and USD 1.04 billion respectively.
- India also **grants 15 to 20 lakh visas every year to Bangladesh nationals** for medical treatment, tourism, work and just entertainment.
- India has provided **developmental assistance worth USD 10 billion**, making Bangladesh the **largest recipient** of India's total of USD 30 billion aid globally.
- For India, Bangladesh has been a **key partner in the Neighbourhood First Policy**.
- Both have **cooperated on pandemic-related moves** and India has **provided medical aid** to Bangladesh.
 - Bangladesh supported India's call for a regional (**SAARC**) **emergency fund for fighting Covid-19** and declared a **contribution of USD 1.5 million** in March 2020.
 - Bangladesh is **ready to collaborate in the development of a Covid-19 vaccine**, including its trial and looks forward to the early and affordable availability of the vaccine.
- The **first trial run for trans-shipment of Indian cargo** through Bangladesh to Northeast states under a pact on the **use of Chittagong and Mongla ports** took place in July 2020.
- However, the proposed countrywide **National Register of Citizens (NRC)** and the **Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019** have **irritated the relations**.

Bangladesh has expressed reservations about CAA and has held it unnecessary.

- Bangladesh has expressed **concerns at the rise in killings at the Indo-Bangladesh border** by the **Border Security Force** (BSF).
- Indian Foreign Secretary has recently visited Dhaka to discuss “**security-related issues of mutual interest**” while trying to address the potential irritant issues.
 - There was an agreement on **timely implementation of projects** and greater attention to development projects in Bangladesh under the **Indian Lines of Credit**.
 - Bangladesh has requested to reopen travel through **Benapole-Petrapole land port** which has been halted by the West Bengal government in the wake of the pandemic.

Way Forward

- In the wake of the Ladakh standoff, India needs to become even more sensitive to Chinese defence inroads into Bangladesh.
- The Teesta project is important and urgent from India’s point of view, so it is crucial to solve it as soon as possible.
- India has to implement all its assurances in a time-bound manner otherwise the latent anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh threatens to damage the friendly ties.

Source: IE