

Pakistan and the Energy Feud between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

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“Cheap power is Pakistan’s dream. Energy import from Tajikistan is its short cut to nirvana from load shedding but ignoring the Uzbek objections will weaken Pakistan’s case against Kishangunga project taken up by India in North Kashmir. Uzbekistan has an incentive to refrain Pakistan from pursuing the Tajik plan. And Tajikistan is demanding its price for its cheap power”.

Pakistan’s plans to buy 1000MW electricity from Tajikistan have sparked a new row between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan which are already locked in a long-running dispute over water and energy. Not only Uzbekistan but Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan also, are opposed. Within Pakistan too, Prime Minister Gilani’s plan to tide over power crisis with energy imports from Central Asia has run into rough weather.

Some Pakistan experts see an analogy between Uzbekistan-Tajik water row and India –Pakistan water discord and aver that importing Tajik power ignoring the Uzbek objections will weaken Pakistan’s case against Kishangunga project taken up by India in the Gurez Valley in North Kashmir. Conceived in 1994 and expected to generate around 330 MW of power, Kishangunga is scheduled to be completed in 2014.

Islamabad’s case against Delhi is built on the argument as a lower riparian state Pakistan stands to lose out on its water share of Kishanganga, which, India, as an upper riparian state, is constructing as a run of the river scheme close to the Line of Control (LOC). The Indian venture envisages diverting part of the water of river Kishangunga for power generation and releasing it back into the Jhelum to flow into Pakistan. The two main objections Pakistan has raised are on account of the project’s design and diversion of water.

Tajik plans to sell electricity to Pakistan from Roghun hydroelectric dam, which has faced decades of delay. It is a part of the Central Asia-South Asia Regional Energy and Trade project, also known as CASA-1000. The dam is being built on the Amu Darya River, which also runs through Uzbekistan and benefits Turkmenistan. The project will provide cheapest power that costs around five cents per unit. It envisages a 750-kilometre long High Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) power line to Pakistan through Afghanistan.

In the years ahead, Kyrgyzstan will use the transmission line to sell 300MW to Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is for this reason that Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan have agreed to set up a special purpose vehicle to lay the line through Sangtuda (Tajikistan), Kabul (Afghanistan) and Peshawar (Pakistan).

UZBEK CASE

Uzbekistan's case is simple and uncomplicated. It points out that it was not consulted on Roghun dam, and in that sense the CASA-1000 project is a breach of international law. Not only Uzbekistan but Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan too are opposed to the project because a mandatory Trans-boundary Environmental Impact Assessment (TEIA) report on the dam has not been shared by Tajikistan for clearance. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has made mandatory clearance of TEIA by lower riparians in its recent verdict on Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros hydroelectric project case between Hungary and Slovakia.

Uzbek envoy in Islamabad Arif Karimov has registered a formal protest with the Pakistan foreign ministry by delivering a `letter of disapproval` even as Tashkent has told Dushanbe that Roghun dam would deprive its main commercial crop, cotton, of irrigation water. The Uzbek government is also worried about Kyrgyzstan's plans to build two power plants- Kambarata-1 and -2 on the Naryn, a tributary of the Syr Darya, which runs through Tajik and Uzbek territories to reach Kazakhstan.

Pakistan plans for Tajik power were discussed in detail during a visit to Dushanbe by Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Gilani on March 24 and 25. He views power imports as the only way for power nirvana since his country is reeling under close to 20 hours of load shedding in towns and villages alike. The power shortfall is presently estimated at over 6,000 MW and is increasing. It is expected to touch 10,000 MW in another two years, according to a report prepared by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute of Pakistan (SDPI). The report projects the demand to more than double in 10 years to 42,000mw.

POWER NIRVANA..?

The situation could not have reached crisis proportions had the government managed to complete 19 of the run-of-the river power projects on schedule by 2007. Only one, 86 MW Malakand-III project has been completed during the past eight years. The country has hydel power potential of over 120,000 MW, of which 56,773 MW is exploitable. However, it has only been able to tap 6,703MW. This is about six per cent of the potential and 32.8 per cent of the energy mix.

In a sweeping indictment, SDPI report says, the delay in the completion of 1,848 MW Neelum-Jhelum and Chakothi-Hattian projects in 'Azad' Kashmir and Kohala project on the Jhelum, which were scheduled to be commissioned in June 2010, speaks volumes about the government's lack of interest in pursuing hydropower plans.

Though generation continues to look southwards, power tariff continue to look northwards. The tariffs have gone up by 95pc since the Zardari government came to office in March 2008. In its bid to please the IMF and to bridge the resource gap, another 15 to 18 per cent hike in power tariff looks inevitable.

There is merit in the Uzbek case that it was not shared the environment impact report. According to the Tajik envoy in Islamabad, the study is not done yet. A Canadian firm is conducting feasibility study that would be completed soon, he says. The World Bank is willing to finance the project though the Asian Development Bank (ADB) had shown reluctance to move ahead with provision of funding. Estimated cost is \$ 865 million. It will be completed in three years in public-private partnership from the date of financial closure.

Uzbek envoy took a gentle dig at Islamabad and Dushanbe alike in his communication to

Pakistan government, as reported by Karachi daily, Dawn. "We believe that Pakistan being member of International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD) ought to check that hydropower project of CASA has not fulfilled the obligations to save environment of lower riparian country laid down by this esteem institution," said the Uzbek communication, adding the court of Neutral expert in Baglihar Dam case (against India) had also followed same guidelines for design of the project spillway.

LOSS BY DEFAULT

Same view was voiced by the News International (March 9, 2011) which said the government's purported plans to import 1000 MW from Tajikistan could strengthen the Indian case in Court of Arbitration on the Kishanganga as Tajikistan, like India, is also an upper riparian country.

"It (the power import) will provide New Delhi a strong argument in the legal battle with Islamabad ongoing in the Arbitration Court as Pakistan being the lower riparian country will itself end up tacitly ceding the right of upper riparian country of Tajikistan to build the Ragun dam and to then import electricity from it despite the fact that lower riparian countries in Central Asia States including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are opposing the construction of the said dam fearing that it would reduce the water flows that are destined to reach the lower riparian countries", Khalid Mustafa wrote in the News.

The Tajik President is understandably eager to ink the agreement for export of electricity to Pakistan but the agreement by ignoring the opposition of the low riparian countries particularly from Uzbekistan will not only weaken our argument in the ongoing battle with India in the Arbitration court, but will also inflict huge damage on our existing political, historical, Islamic and economic ties with all the lower riparian countries, the daily quoted eminent water and electricity expert as saying.

There is another aspect to the row. It is that it would worsen the ongoing tension among the five Central Asian States that has arisen out of the fast depletion of Aral Sea. Rapid environment changes in Central Asia due to drought and drying of Aral Sea area may in course of time cause of devastating impact in Pakistan too when westerly weather system collide with the monsoon weather system

UZBEK INCENTIVE- TAJIK PRICE

Uzbekistan has an incentive to refrain Pakistan from pursuing the Tajik power dream. It has offered Islamabad to take up three hydropower projects of 1315MW capacity on river Swat in which "the Uzbek government and other lower riparian will also consider financial help to start these projects". These alternate projects would give "2.5 million acres feet of additional water storage capacity", help curb menace of floods and generate domestic cheap electricity and help avert flood peaks to save Kalabagh, Taunsa, Guddu, Sukkur, Kotri, Jinnah and Chashma barrages.

Tajikistan is also demanding its price for its cheap power. It is the expulsion of Tajik students who had enrolled in Pakistani madrasas illegally. Tajikistan is worried over growing Islamic militancy in the country and sees Afghanistan and Pakistan as the main source of infiltrators. Under the Tajik law, any student who wants to study overseas must first seek due permission from the government.

As Tajik Ambassador to Pakistan, Dr Zubaydullo N Zubaydov says, Dushanbe is not against its students enrolling in Pakistan madrasas. It only wants a proper regulation of the intake. Interestingly, neither the Pakistan government nor the Pakistan army chief Gen Pervez Kayani is yet to respond to the request though he made his objection as early as January 18, 2011.

Regional economic cooperation is a laudable goal but it cannot be a one-way street. How Afghanistan would assure the safety and reliability of Tajik electricity supplies through its territory which is listed as the most vulnerable part of the globe is an issue for discussion some other time. Not now at least.

The author is a Delhi based senior journalist and distinguished commentator on South Asian issues. Presently, he is the Chief Editor, Policy Research Group, which is an independent think tank

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