

Nepal Water Conservation Foundation 80th Pani Satsang
Women for Water Partnership & Global Water Partnership South Asia's
Signposts to Bali

Hydro-Diplomacy: pathways to enhance water cooperation
Concept Note

The Issue

As with climate change or urban development, water problems are “**wicked problems**” in that, not only are they complex and confounding, but very often there is deep-seated disagreement about even “what the problem is”. It means conflicts about proposed solutions will be as or even more vexing. On reflection, this is not surprising as water is life; it affects everything; and people are affected by its scarcity or abundance differently, in diverse sectors, times and places, leading them to value things very contrarily and thus disagree on what to do about it (Hulme, 2009).

COP27 has finally admitted that the climate problem, though created by the energy sector, is a water problem since society is going to feel its adverse impact through too much and too little water at the wrong place and time. Excess heat trapped in the atmosphere from greenhouse gases means global atmospheric wind patterns (that never recognized national or any other man-made boundaries) are no longer comfortably predictable. This is especially true in South Asia totally dependent for its water supply on four months of monsoon rains and some winter westerlies. It requires countries here cooperating in better understanding these “sky rivers” and their changing precipitation discharge. Sadly, COP28 did not manage to take this admission to the next level of creative action.

In truth, regional (and even in-country) cooperation on water in its varied avatars – atmospheric and soil moisture, groundwater, freshwater in rivers and lakes as well as their pollution from human activities – leaves much to be desired. Even on the limited aspect of the overall water cycle – transboundary rivers – progress in agreement implementation is hardly praiseworthy: an example is the Mahakali treaty between Nepal and India that has wallowed in impasse for much of the last three decades (Gyawali and Dixit, 2000). The Ganga treaty between India and Bangladesh is up for renegotiations in 2026, while many in-country disputes are stuck in legal imbroglio. The Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan is becoming dysfunctional and riddled with legal disputes.

To chart a new and more productive pathway in regional cooperation in water, especially in the Age of Climate Change, hydro-diplomacy emerges as a promising avenue recognized as such by many, including the forthcoming 10th World Water Forum in Bali which has identified hydro-diplomacy as the fourth of its six sub-themes. The question is how? Through which government and non-government agencies? To achieve what goals? With what possible inter-sectoral compromises and trade-offs?

The Approach

If policy is something that is openly stated, diplomacy is the art of ferreting out the unstated qualms and misgivings of the other side, which, in the realm of water are multitude (Gyawali, 2013). In most cases, at official bi- or multi-lateral meetings, let alone discussed, they generally cannot even be placed on the agenda due to the

sensitivities involved. In private or off-the-record conversations, however, very senior officials have spilled the beans about such underlying fears, that behind the Indus treaty being one such case that has been written about and will be presented in this Pani Satsang (Gyawali, 2001). To address this conundrum, processes such as track-2 or track-3 are proposed, which have had some successes but not enough. What will be discussed in this Pani Satsang is how non-state voices such as those of civic movements, businesses and academic communities can cooperate across the border to allow different sides to learn to appreciate those hidden qualms, sensitize their state actors about them and perhaps cobble up compromise solutions and trade-offs.

Such a pluralistic approach encompasses the engagement of state as well as non-state actors and recognizes their crucial role in addressing water-related issues (Gyawali, 2001a). Such an approach, explained by Cultural Theory (or the Neo-Durkheimian Theory of Plural Rationalities: (Thompson, 2008)) and the recent nexus approach (Gyawali, 2015), aids in understanding the power dynamics at play. It could also enrich cross-border constructive engagement related to the entire gamut of water resource management challenges while promoting equitable benefit sharing. Indeed, Verweij (2000) using Cultural Theory has shown how both the Rhine as well as the Great Lakes were cleaned up, with institutional dynamics lessons for South Asia where all rivers passing through their capital or other major cities have been polluted beyond stress to insult levels.

One of the key components of hydro diplomacy thus is creating pluralistic platforms cutting across not just national and sub-national boundaries but also that of siloed sectors and disciplines. This is the *sine qua non* for informed and constructive engagement fostering sensitization and collaboration among various social solidarities and enhancing their capacities for crafting out-of-the-conventional-box solutions. Unfortunately, such platforms for open dialogues to build public consensus on “wicked problems” are not as easy to come by.

References

- Gyawali, D. (2015). *Nexus Governance: Harnessing Contending Forces at Work*. Gland, Switzerland: IWA/IUCN. [Nexus-002.pdf \(iucn.org\)](#)
- Gyawali, D. (2013). *Bringing Hydro-Diplomacy into Nepal's Economic Diplomacy*. Chapter in M. Shrestha and A. Shakya (eds) *Vision on Foreign Affairs*. Kathmandu: International Concern Center.
- Gyawali, D. (2001). *Pluralistic Politics under Monistic Design: Water Accords in South Asia*. Chapter in R. Samaddar and H. Reifeld (eds) *Peace as Process: Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution in South Asia*. Delhi: Manohar Publishers for Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Germany).
- Gyawali, D. (2001a). *Water beyond the State: Resolving Conflicts with Institutional Pluralism*. Chapter in S. Sahadevan (JNU ed.) *Conflict and Peacemaking in South Asia*. Delhi: Lancer's Book.
- Gyawali, D. and Dixit, A. (2000). *Mahakali Impasse: A Futile Paradigm's Bequested Travails*. In Dhruva Kumar (ed) *Domestic Conflict and Crisis of Governability in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Center for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS), Tribhuban University. {Earlier version published as *Mahakali Impasse and Indo-Nepal Water Conflict* vol XXXIV no 9. Bombay: Economic and Political Weekly.

(Feb 27- March 5, 1999) <http://waterbeyondborders.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Mahakali-Impasse-and-Indo-Nepal-Water-Conflict.pdf> }

Hulme, M. (2009). *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson, M. (2008). *Organising and Disorganising: A Dynamic and Non-Linear Theory of Institutional Emergence and its Implications*. UK: Triarchy Press. [Organising and Disorganising - Triarchy Press](#)

Verweij, M. (2000). *Transboundary Environmental Problems and Cultural Theory: The Protection of the Rhine and the Great Lakes*. UK: Palgrave.

This Interaction

This episode of *Pani Satsang* policy discourse will focus on the essence of hydro-diplomacy, as well as key challenges and opportunities that it can offer. Distinguished panelists, participating scholars and practitioners from South Asia and beyond will reflect on:

1. The opening presentation on Cultural Theory of Hydro-diplomacy.
2. Simmering local, national or international water and climate-related conflicts they have explored or experienced.
3. The relevance of hydro diplomacy as they see should be practiced to strengthen collaboration on water and to ameliorate conflicts.
4. What message to take to the 10th World Water Forum in Bali on this count?

Panelists, Moderators, Leads

Mr Madhu Raman Acharya: (former foreign secretary and ambassador):

Mr. Madhu Raman Acharya is a former civil servant and career diplomat of Nepal. He joined Nepal Foreign Service as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1996. During his diplomatic career, Mr. Acharya served as the Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of Nepal in New Delhi (1997-1998), Nepal's Ambassador to Bangladesh (1998-2001), Foreign Secretary (2002-05), and Permanent Representative to the United Nations (2005-2009). In 1983, he entered the Nepalese Civil Service as a Section Officer in the Ministry of Home Affairs. He joined the Ministry of Finance in 1990 as Assistant Secretary, and from 1993 to 1996 he was Under-Secretary in that Ministry. Mr. Acharya began his career in 1982 as Assistant Lecturer at Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, from where he holds a Master's Degree in science and public administration and a graduate diploma in law. Mr. Acharya also served as Director of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) (2010 -2011). During the 1990s, he also served in United Nations missions in Cambodia, South Africa and Liberia. Mr. Acharya is the author of *Business of Bureaucracy* (2014), *Nepal: Culture Shift* (2001), *Nepal Worldview* (2019), *The Talking Points* (2020), *Race Against Time* (2022). Born on 24 February 1957 in Udayapur, east Nepal, he is married and has two children.

Ms Kusum Athukorala: (Regional Chair, GWP South Asia)

Crossing disciplinary and academic boundaries from 12 years previous experience as a university teacher in languages and cultural studies to development studies, primarily water resources management, Kusum Athukorala holds a M.Sc in Managing Rural Change, Imperial College, University of London. As multidisciplinary skilled development professional, she has been recognized for her contribution to rural development, IWRM, gender and water; she is the recipient of the International Water Association's International Women in Water Award and the Zonta Woman of Achievement for Environment. She has held a series of responsible positions in national, regional and international boards and spent a large part of the past decade in establishing and growing an array of national and international organizations related to water management such as the Global Water Partnership, Saci WATERS, Women for Water Partnership and NetWwater .She is currently SC member Women for Water Partnership and Chair GWP South Asia Regional Water Partnership.

Mariet Verhoef-Cohen: (Chair, WfWP)

Mariet Verhoef-Cohen is President of Women for Water Partnership (WfWP) since 2014 and Soroptimist International President 2017-2019. Recognised as an expert on the topic of water and how it impacts the lives of women and girls globally. She represents WfWP at UN Water; in the Dushanbe International Advisory Committee for the Decade of Water and Sustainable development; at UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP) in the Coalition of the Call for Action; in five World Water Forums; presented at Stockholm World Water Weeks and CSW's in New York. Mariet was active in 5 World Water Forums and is preparing with Signposts to Bali for the World Water Forum in Bali in May 2024. Mariet is Vice-Chair of FAO/WASAG, the Global Framework on Water Security and Agriculture (FAO) and Board Member of Human Rights 2 Water. WfWP coordinated the Special Event for the UN 2023 Water Conference NY in March 2023. Mariet was granted the Royal distinction of Officer in the Order of Orange Nassau in recognition of her ground-breaking voluntary work for Soroptimist International and WfWP and in January 2020, she was honoured with the Evolutionary Business Council Global Impact Award 2019.

Dr Ngamindra Dahal: (meteorologist and bio-char expert)

Ngamindra Dahal, PhD is a Nepal based climate, water professional with hydro-meteorological and environmental education background. Dr Dahal led several studies and published his works in the form of peer review journal articles, book chapters, policy papers, conference proceedings, and op-eds/blogs in popular print media on climate, water and disaster risk management of the Himalayan region. He has been the Academic Advisor of Lumbini International Academy of Science and Technology (LIAST), Chairperson of the Nepal Water Conservation Foundation for Academic Research (waternepal.org.np) and the Executive Member of the Board of Directors of the Climate Action Network South Asia (CANSAs) for the years 2021-2025 (cansouthasia.net). Additionally, he has been affiliated with a number of research and academic institutions such as Senior Research Fellow at Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies (SIAS sias-southasia.org), founding member of South Asian Meteorologists Association (SAMA, www.southasianmet.org) and Faculty-in-Contract at Kathmandu University. His professional track demonstrates the diverse roles and responsibilities and interdisciplinary approaches applied on addressing the issues on water, climate and disaster risk reductions. He has served in various positions, mainly,

as Researcher, Policy Planner/Advisor, Chief Executive Officer, lead, peer reviewer, editor or commentator. Particularly, he served at SIAS in the capacity of Executive Director, at National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) as the Chief of Climate Change and Energy Division, Expert Consultant at Asian Development Bank, World Bank, ICIMOD, UNDP and various international agencies. He has also contributed to build knowledge systems of the Himalaya, South Asia and Nepal specific issues from the perspectives of climate, climate change, disaster risk management and climate friendly technologies including the biochar. More recently he actively pursuing policy research on climate resilient agriculture and water management issues in the backdrop of climate change and urbanizations in South Asia.

Mr. Dipak Gyawali:

A hydropower engineer (Moscow Energy Institute) and political economist (UC Berkeley, California), he is *Pragya* (academician), Nepal Academy of Science and Technology; former Chair, Nepal Water Conservation Foundation; and former Minister of Water Resources of Nepal. His interdisciplinary research focuses on society-technology-resource base interface using Cultural Theory which he gathered working with late Prof. Mary Douglas and her colleagues since 1991. He was founding chair of Nepal's grassroots initiative Rural Self-reliance Development Center and has served as member, expert, guest professor or advisor in many national and international bodies including Nepal Government's "Pokhrel Commission", UNESCO's World Water Development Program, International Hydrological Program, IHE Delft, Mekong's MRC and MPower, Sussex University's Institute for Development Studies, Oxford University's James Martin Institute for Science and Civilization, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA/Vienna), UN University Yokohama, Stockholm Water Week, and many others.

Dr. John Dore: Lead Specialist – Climate Resilience and Water Security, for Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), based in Bangkok, working primarily across East Asia and South Asia. Also Lead Advisor for the Mekong Australia Partnership elements concerned with water security, energy transition and climate action. He is involved in many of Australia's bilateral and regional engagements including government-to-government partnerships and alliances with industry and civil society. Associate Professor at the Australian National University (ANU), serves on the editorial board of the *Water Alternatives* journal and is an associate of the University of Canberra's Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis - Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance. Roles prior to DFAT have included leading the IUCN Asia Water Program and the M-POWER (Mekong Program on Water Environment and Resilience) governance network. John's academic work in deliberative water governance complement his day-to-day engagement in international water diplomacy. Publishing has focused on negotiation, deliberation and scale, and unravelling transboundary water governance complexes.

Ms. Bushra Nishat:

Ms. Bushra Nishat currently works with the World Bank as an Environmental Specialist for the South Asia Region. With a background in environmental sciences and numerical modelling coupled with involvement in policy analysis and socio-political dialogues, throughout her career, Bushra has focused on people-centered environmental interventions and solutions. She started her career as a numerical modeller and has experience in using state of the art modelling tools and advanced technology to support

decision-making processes in environment and water resources management in Bangladesh. Previously, as South Asia Programmes Manager at the International Water Association (IWA), she led various projects on policy engagement and dialogue in Bangladesh and India. Prior to joining IWA, she worked at International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) where she designed and coordinated joint research activities and organized high level cross-border dialogues on a range of issues related to environment and water resources in the South Asia region. She was a member of the National Geographic Society Plastics expedition team which worked to develop a better understanding on how plastic travels from source to sea and to fill critical knowledge gaps. She has co-authored books on water and hydrodiplomacy, and developed a River Atlas which documents 54 rivers shared between Bangladesh and India.

Bushra holds a MSc in Water and Environment Resources Management from UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education, Delft, The Netherlands and B.Sc. Eng. (Civil) from Bangladesh University of Engineering & Technology, (BUET).

Mr. Ali Sheikh: (climate and water expert): Ali Tauqeer Sheikh is presently Advisor Climate Change to the Planning Commission of Pakistan. Ali is a climate change specialist, focused on low-carbon and resilient development, transboundary water issues and just transition for an equitable world. He has engaged in the design, development and delivery of several regional, national, and sub-national level projects, programs, and portfolios. He has also managed diverse multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral teams of climate scientists, policy planners, think-tanks, and activist groups. Ali has served on several national commissions and international committees including the Advisory Group on Learning and Evaluation and the Transformational Change and Learning Partnership (TCLP), both set-up by the Climate Investment Fund (CIF), on behalf of the World Bank and other multilateral development banks. He was the Founding Director & CEO of Leadership for Environment and Development (LEAD) Pakistan and Asia director of Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN). He has also just been appointed to the Board of the recently created Loss and Damage Fund. The pioneering board is charged to operationalize the fund that has initial pledges of \$0.8 billion.

Ms. Ambika Vishwanath: (Director, Kubernein Initiative):

Ambika Vishwanath is the Co-Founder and Director of the Kubernein Initiative, an India based female founded geopolitical advisory. Ambika Vishwanath is a water security and conflict resolution specialist and has lead track-two diplomacy efforts and consulted with governments and international organizations, both in India and around the world (MENA region, South Asia and Europe) for close to 20 years. She focuses on the nexus between foreign policy, water security, conflict and diplomacy. Her work on developing the Blue Peace for the Middle East concept lead to the creation of a High Level UN Panel. Ambika leads Kubernein's flagship initiative on examining the potential for greater inclusivity and gender mainstreaming in India's foreign policy, trade and security in the Indo-Pacific and water and climate security in South Asia.



80th Pani Satsang Event Agenda

Hydro-Diplomacy: pathways to enhance water cooperation

Date: 11th January 2024

Time: 2:00 PM - 4:00 PM [Nepal Standard Time (GMT+5:45hrs)]

Venue: NWCF Meeting Hall, Chundevi Marg, Maharajgunj, and Virtually through Zoom

Link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88395939670?pwd=N2FUSE45RGNVLzNCYkJTV1gyZGQrQT09>

Time	Activity
1:55 PM	Registration
2:00- 2:15 PM	Opening Session <ul style="list-style-type: none">Welcome by Dr Mariet Verhoef-Cohen, Chair WfWPIntroduction by Ms Kusum Athukorala, Regional Chair GWPSASModeration by Dr John Dore, Lead Water Expert DfAT
2:16- 2:40PM	Presentation by Mr Dipak Gyawali , Academician Nepal Academy of Science and Technology & former Minister of Water Resources: <i>“Cultural Theory of Hydro-Diplomacy: navigating institutional pluralism and conflicting values terrain”</i>
2:40 -3:50pm	Panel Discussion Moderator: Dr John Dore , Lead Water Expert DfAT Panelists: [reacting to presentation and putting forth their views on hydro-diplomacy] <ul style="list-style-type: none">Ms.Ambika Vishwanath (India)Mr. Ali Sheikh (Pakistan)Ms Bushra Nishat (Bangladesh)Mr Madhu Raman Acharya (Nepal) [To Engage, Interact, Inspire each other]
3:50- 4:00 PM	Concluding Remarks: Dr John Dore , Moderator & Lead Expert ,DfAT Vote of Thanks: Dr. Ngamindra Dahal , Chair NWCF

Note: Join us in person or virtually as we embark on this transformative journey towards meaningful resolution of water conflicts. Together, let's build a future where every drop creates a ripple of positive change! #BridgingTheGap2024 #WaterEquality