Managing Shared Basins – Integrated Basin-wide Approaches to the Management of Kabul River: Challenges and Opportunities
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Background
The Kabul River Basin is one of the most important transboundary rivers in the Asia region. Shared between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Kabul River Basin is a vital resource for both countries, particularly in terms of economic growth, energy security, food security and supply of water to its populations. However, diplomacy and dialogue between the countries is constrained by ongoing political challenges, making it difficult to share the benefits of the Kabul River waters. Water experts contend that in order to maximize growth in both countries, there is a need for integrated development with an approach of sharing of costs and benefits of the Kabul River Basin, as compared to the division of water and unilateral development. However, various factors such as political mistrust and a lack of knowledge/data on both sides are damaging the chances for this to happen.

In order to highlight this issue, LEAD Pakistan hosted an interactive session on “Integrated Basin-wide Approaches to the Management of Kabul River: Challenges & Opportunities” as part of its LEADING Perspectives on Managing Shared Basins. During the session, Ambassador Shafqat Kakakhel discussed and shared insights from his research paper, similarly titled “Challenges and Opportunities for Implementing an Integrated Basin-wide Approach to the Management of Kabul River Waters”. The aim of this session was to bring together a diverse set of experts to accelerate the thought process on pressing water and environmental issues. It also sought to take on the challenge of generating an informed, pluralistic and multi-sectoral analysis in order to propose future options for consideration by all concerned stakeholders.

The Kabul River Basin
Kabul River, rising in the Sanglakh Range 70 km west of Kabul city, is a 700 km long river that flows in eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan. It flows 560 km through east Afghanistan passing Kabul and Jalalabad and to the north of the Khyber Pass, it enters into Pakistan to join the Indus River at Attock. Its sub-tributaries are Kunar, Bara, Logar, Panjsher and Swat rivers. One of the chief tributaries of the Kabul River Basin is the Kunar River originating in Pakistan and enters into Afghanistan in the Kunar province to join the Kabul River at Jalalabad. The sub-tributary, Kunar River, represents around 12 percent of the total water available in Afghanistan.

Significance of the Kabul River Basin
The Kabul River Basin holds immense value for both countries for a variety of reasons. Although the Kabul River is not the largest river flowing in Afghanistan, its location makes it a highly crucial water base for the country. The residents of Jalalabad depend on the Kabul River for purposes such as drinking, irrigation and sanitation. For Pakistan, the Kabul River also holds significant value for its contribution to the national economy and to agricultural productivity. Soon after it enters Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the Kabul River enters the Warsak dam, which is the first large multipurpose hydroelectric dam in the country, having a cumulative installed capacity of 243 MW. Furthermore, the Kabul River also has major contributions towards Pakistan’s irrigation system, which is largely fed by the Indus River.
An Integrated Basin-Wide Approach to the Management of the Kabul River Basin

In the past, several efforts have been made to facilitate the water discourse on the Kabul River Basin by both countries. Unfortunately, these haven’t been met with much success. In 2004, Pakistan took its first major initiative to engage Afghanistan through a water sharing dialogue on the Kabul River Basin. However, this mission was rendered unsuccessful, and the reason for this was the Afghans’ inability to provide data to Pakistan. In 2006, and later on again in 2011, the World Bank stepped in as a mediator to stimulate dialogue in integrated basin management between the two countries. Unfortunately, this too failed as the Afghans stated they didn’t have data or the required experts to participate in a water dialogue. Today, however, Afghanistan has an impressive legal structure for dealing with transboundary water issues, and has the support of the international community in helping it with its capacity building.

Opportunities and Challenges

Adopting an integrated basin-wide approach to the management of the Kabul waters will create many opportunities for both countries, enhancing the economic growth and wellbeing of their populations. The multipurpose dams on the Kabul River, if designed and operated with mutual understanding, can help to control flooding in Nowshera, store and regulate the release of floodwater during lean water months, and generate electricity that can be mutually shared. The two countries can also work together to increase the efficiency of utilization of water, offsetting the increase in demand.

However, despite these opportunities, both countries are faced with a number of challenges, the primary one being how to overcome mistrust and find a way to open channels of communication and dialogue to establish a working relationship between relevant institutions and actors. Secondly, the availability of data for design and operation of water infrastructure in Afghanistan is insufficient. There is an apparent reluctance by the Afghans to freely share information, particularly with Pakistan, and this needs to be addressed.

The Way Forward

In order to address these concerns, a number of steps need to be taken. Regional stakeholders should regularly exchange information about their water policies, in order to build greater trust across borders. Pakistan must also convene its efforts to secure a bilateral treaty for the use of water related to the Kabul River, and also work towards finalizing its national water policy. Both countries must also strive to bring greater coherence amongst their water institutions, which are currently experiencing a number of institutional failures. Steps also need to be undertaken to ensure that the water discussion is handled by competent people, where there is internal and political consensus on decision making, and non-state actors are encouraged to participate. The international community should also facilitate technical support like satellite imagery to both countries since both require more training in the management of water boundaries. Lastly, a water sector leadership program built on long-term capacity building needs to be created, so that we can train the next generation of leaders and policymakers on issues of water management and benefit sharing of the Kabul River waters.