

# Water scarcity in Pakistan: A threat to national security

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"The next world war will  
be over water, not oil."

Ismail Serageldin

These chilling words echo a stark reality for Pakistan, a country whose existence is tied to the availability of water. Since the inception of Pakistan, water scarcity has been a serious concern impacting the country in many ways. According to security studies, security means protecting against external threats, this concept has expanded to include non-traditional security threats like shortage of resources, environmental challenges and internal conflicts.

In Pakistan, the issue of water scarcity has been escalating to a multifaceted threat. It encompasses not just environmental or economic threats, it threatens national security of a country. Water scarcity in Pakistan poses a serious threat to its national security, as it endangers economic stability, escalates provincial and intercommunal conflicts and exacerbates geopolitical tensions.

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In recent years, Pakistan has become dangerously close to being classified as "water stressed" country with per capital availability dropping from 5210 cubic meter in 1950s to 930 cubic meter in year 2020. Pakistan majorly rely on river Indus and its tributaries for water supply. The water availability in Indus Basin is depleting due to growing population of Pakistan. More people means demand for more water, which leads to drastic shortages. Climate change being another important factor. Pakistan's lack of water management and low water storage capacity further escalates the crisis.

Shortage of water does not only have agricultural or environmental implications, it can lead to circumstances that can threaten a state's security. Water scarcity has a direct impact on economy. 24% of GDP of Pakistan comes from Agriculture sector which is heavily dependent on water. Crops like wheat, cotton and rice depend on water availability. Water shortage leads to lesser production of food like it happened in 2023, mangoes'

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production in Pakistan was reduced to half of original production. This not only creates food insecurity but also impacts country's exports which causes further stress on economy.

One of the major exports of Pakistan besides food items is textile and sports items industry. Industries too rely on water for cleaning, cooling and many other purposes. Lack of availability of water have adverse effects on industries leading to low production and negatively impacting economy. According to a report Pakistan will have to invest 8-10% of its GDP by 2030 to deal with the issue of water scarcity, which definitely have direct implications on economic growth of the country. Poor economic conditions will create an unrest among people, and lack of confidence in state's authority. This situation can get worse and pose a threat to state's internal security.

Like economic distress, internal conflicts can also prove challenging for national's security. Pakistan has a history of interprovincial conflicts over water distribution. There has always been

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reservations regarding the equal and equitable distribution of water. Punjab being an agricultural province, relies on water from Indus river. Punjab lies above Sindh, and is accused of using more water. As a result Sindh has to face water shortages. Kalabagh dam is one such example of water disputes among province. Similarly, Balochistan and KPK have reservations regarding unfair distribution of water. These persisting grievances can lead to interprovincial grudges, weakening the national cohesion.

Another internal problem is the rural-urban migration due to water scarcity in rural areas. People move to the urban area, establishing settlements against the wishes of urban population. This causes stress on already overstretched cities. A competition for resources start between newly migrated population and urban people leading to a situation of chaos. This creates governance issues and lack of management in cities fueling unrest among people. This further aggravates the threats to national cohesion and internal security.

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Due to growing urbanization, and escalating water scarcity in urban cities like Karachi and Lahore, illegal groups called mafias have taken roots. These groups control the water resources and exploit the needs of common people. Day after day, these mafias are getting stronger, challenging the authority of state. These overly growing mafias inculcate mistrust among people against their state. People stop believing in the authority of the state, leading to unrest in the country posing a serious threat to national security.

Water security is not at only responsible for internal conflicts and uprising but is also responsible for rising geopolitical concerns for Pakistan. Pakistan has a history of dispute over water with India. This issue was somewhat resolved by Indus Water Treaty signed in 1960. India has been violating the treaty by building dams on river Indus. Pakistan has appealed against this violation in International Court of Justice. The water resources have been depleting continuously and India wants to

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deprive Pakistan of water completely.

"Blood and water does not flow together."

(PM Modi)

India has been trying continuously to overthrow the TWT unilaterally so that it can take control of Pakistan's water resources. This whole scenario has further exacerbated the issue of national security. Any conflict between the two neighbouring nuclear powers can lead to drastic consequences.

The rising tensions between Pakistan and India are threatening the regional peace and primarily the national security of Pakistan. India being an upper riparian country has a leverage over Pakistan. It can blackmail, or threat Pakistan by increasing its control over Pakistan's water resources. But if India does so, it will set an example to follow. China can increase control over Brahmaputra Basin depriving lower riparian countries of water. The security will get worse for the whole region anticipating the worst of consequences.



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Increasing water scarcity makes Pakistan strategically vulnerable to blackmailing and water related threats, putting its national security in grave danger. The history of bitter relations between India and Pakistan, and India's tendency to use every mean to damage Pakistan's economy and security makes the situation more intense. India has also financed Afghanistan to build dams over river Kabul depriving KPK of water resource. This has involved one more party Afghanistan, further expanding the magnitude of the crisis. If the conflict arises, it will not only involve India and Pakistan but will include whole South Asia into war, with Pakistan being more vulnerable and damage prone.

In order to avoid any serious complications in future Pakistan need to address this issue seriously. In order to conserve its national security, it need to conserve water first. It is crucial to build dams and infrastructure for water conservation, also to increase water capacity of Mangla and Tarbela dams. Pakistan is in dire need of effective water diplomacy, for

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peaceful resolution of water disputes' with neighbouring countries. Furthermore, Pakistan needs reforms in agriculture sector to avoid water loss through irrigation system as 90% of water loss is attributed to irrigation system.

Public awareness regarding the severity of the issue, is imperatively needed. Only then Pakistan can address this issue and avert the possible national security threats.

Pakistan's national security is threatened from both internal and external issues finding their roots in water scarcity. The persisting situation can further escalates economic destabilization, fuels internal conflicts and exacerbates geopolitical tensions. Any possible, serious national security threat can be avoided by taking adequate measures to conserve water, diplomatic solution of water disputes both nationally and internationally.

For survival, country needs food and water. Water scarcity will lead to food insecurity, which will in turn make the situation unchangeable.

Hence, to avoid such circumstance Pakistan needs to take immediate and effective measures.