

Q How do you see water Politics in the region after India's decision to move out of IWT and China's decision to build the world largest dam on Brahmaputra River?

1. Introduction :

Water has always been a lifeline for South Asia, where agriculture, energy and daily survival depends heavily on the river systems flowing from Himalayas. Recently, two major events have reshaped the regional water landscape; India's decision to suspend Indus Water Treaty with Pakistan, and China's plan to build the world's largest hydropower dam on Brahmaputra river.

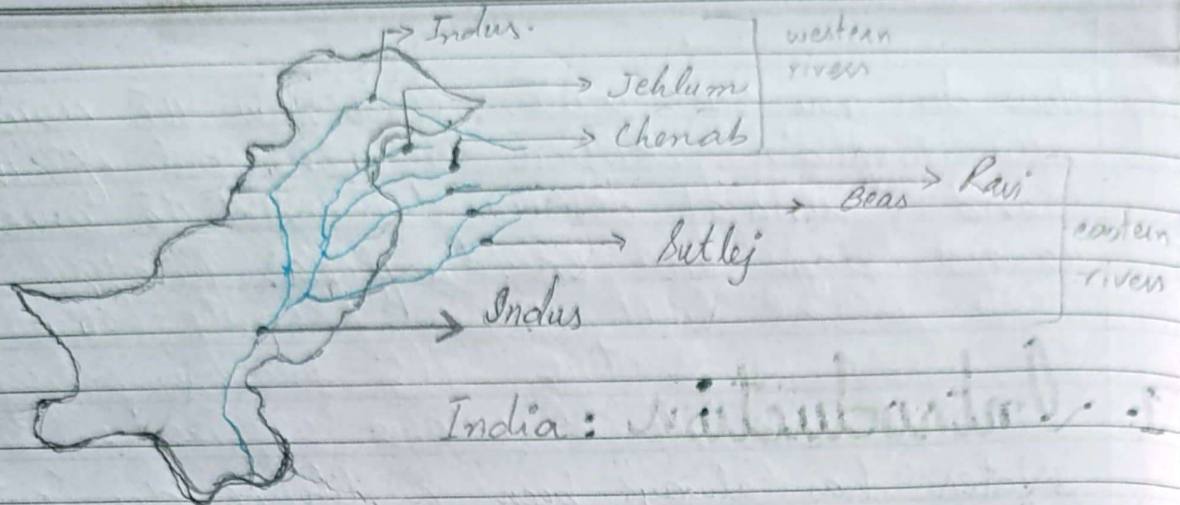
These actions have raised alarm bells and, transforming water from a resource sharing issue into a matter of National Security and strategic rivalry.

2. Background:

2.1: Indus Water Treaty (IWT):

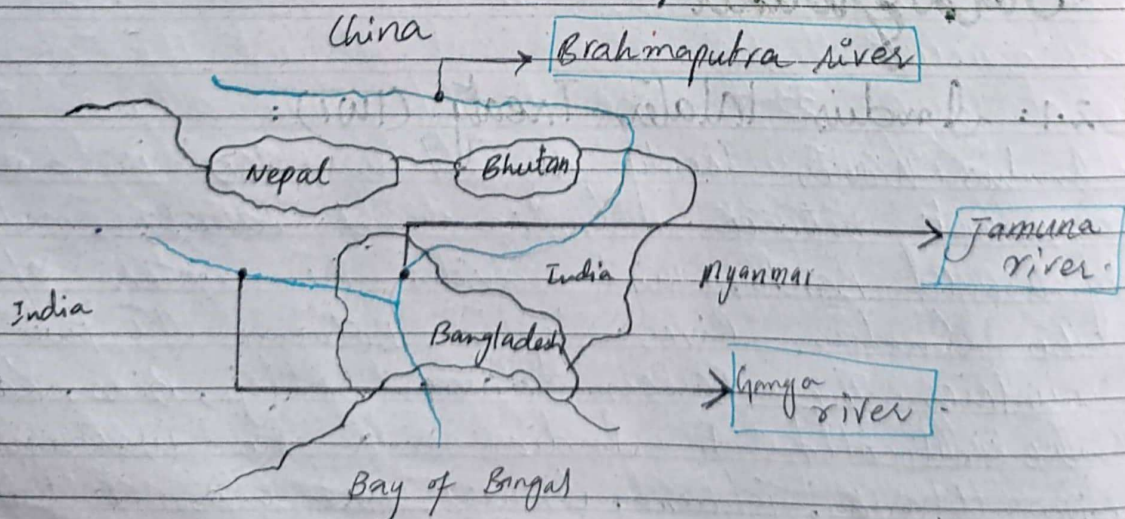
Indus Water Treaty signed in 1960 is an agreement between India and Pakistan, mediated by World Bank, that divides the water of the Indus River system between the two countries. The Eastern Rivers (Sutlej, Bias, Ravi) were allocated to India and the western Rivers (Chenab, Jhelum, Indus) were given to Pakistan.

Date:



2.2 Brahmaputra Basin:

The Brahmaputra Basin is a major river system spanning China, India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, originating in the Kailash ranges of Himalayas at an elevation of 5300 m. After flowing through Tibet it enters India through Arunachal Pradesh and flows through Assam and Bangladesh before entering in the Bay of Bengal. It is considered lifeline of North-East Indian region and Bangladesh.



3. Recent Events and Their Consequences:

3.1 Indus Water Treaty held in Abeyance:

On April 22, 2025, a terrorist attack on civilians took place in Palgam, for which India blamed Pakistan for the incident. As an aftermath, on April 23rd 2025, Indian Government announced that IWT is suspended (unilaterally by India which is against the treaty); India held the IWT in abeyance with immediate action, until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably abjures its support for cross-border terrorism -

3.2 Consequences after IWT is suspended:

Pakistan's culture is heavily dependent on Indus River system. Approximately 80% of the cultivated land is irrigated by Indus River system, which is crucial for about 90% of food production in Pakistan.

According to the World Bank almost 50% cut in the flow of water of western rivers took place after 1990s, among which Chenab has the highest cut percentage that is 55%. This situation will be worsen after this suspension -

Not only Agriculture but 30% of domestic life and 40% of Industries depend on these rivers. Hydropower generation will also be affected by this unlawful act of India. All these issues will cause a big decline in Pakistan's economy, energy, agriculture, and Industries causing new and unprecedented challenges to the National security.

3.3: China's Plan to build Brahmaputra Mega dam:

China formally began the construction of World largest hydropower project on the River Brahmaputra in July, 2025. The project was named as Medog Hydropower station, and is also called Mega-dam. The project will consist of five cascade hydropower stations, with a total investment estimated at around 1.2 trillion Yuan (~\$167.8 Billion). China had planned the project for several years but the approval was given in December 2024.

The stated reason by China for the construction of such a massive project is primarily to meet its domestic need of energy especially in Tibet. Other reasons justified by China are to achieve the national goals of Carbon Neutrality and transition of clean energy sources.

3.4: Expected Consequences of Mega-dam:

3.4.1: On India:

The Mega-dam project triggers fear of water vulnerability to China. As it can cause upto 85% flow reduction, threats of agricultural loss and lack of drinking water awaits India. 30% of India's freshwater and 44% of the nation's hydropower potential depends on this river which is now at stake.

3.4.2: On Bangladesh:

According to an Analysis even a 5% drop in Brahmaputra can cause 15% reduction in the agricultural output of Bangladesh. While, the river provides 65% of the Bangladesh's water. This can also cause tensions in India-Bangladesh relation because of the recent suspension of IWT. (discussed further in 4.5 & 4.8).

4. Effects on Regional Politics:

The Indus Water Treaty and the Mega project of China hold significance relevance in terms of aftermath and repercussions. The most noteworthy are given below:

4.1: Escalation of India-Pakistan hostility:

Indus Water Treaty was one of the few remaining platform of dialogue between India and Pakistan. Suspension of IWT will remove this channel. Pakistan may take the issue to the International forums like International Court of Arbitration etc. because Pakistan denies the accusation, of involvement in Pahalgam attack, by India, which is the cause of suspension of Indus Water Treaty. Pakistan calls it a False Flag Operation by India. The recent Indo-Pak war proved the intensity of rivalry and if this won't be sorted the situation will worsen if Pakistan faces water shortage. Field Marshal COAS Gen. Asim Munir in his recent visit to America announced

Nuclear Threat to India if it stops water flow to Pakistan.

4.2: Challenge to the Nuclear Security of the region:

The recent India-Pakistan war fought over terrorist attack in India, was a prove of possible future threats to the region.

Pakistan will wait for India to build dam on Indus, then we will destroy it with 10 missiles.

says the F.M. Army Chief of Pakistan.

He has also threatened to take down half of the world if Pakistan is attacked as it is a Nuclear Nation.

4.3: China's Enhanced Leverage in South Asia:

China is recognised as a significant global Soft Power. Without direct involvement in the India-Pakistan war of 2025, it has proved its advancement in warfare Technology. Now, it is also rising as an upstream water hegemon by building world largest dam with a plan output of estimated 60,000 megawatts of energy. This would be enough to meet annual electricity needs of over 300 million people making it a strong, and self reliant Nation (which it already is but will strengthen its power too.)

4.4: India's 'Double Front' Dilemma:

While trying to gain leverage over Pakistan, it simultaneously becomes vulnerable to China's upstream project on Brahmaputra. This will create 'double front' water security challenge for India, complicating its foreign policy and forcing it to balance aggression with caution.

4.5: Bangladesh's rising anxiety:

As a downstream state of Brahmaputra, Bangladesh may face both floods and scarcity due to China's unilateral actions. Possible strains in Delhi-Dhaka relations can happen if India fails to secure guarantees from China, pushing Bangladesh closer to China for support.

4.6: Weakening Multilateralism and Trust:

Suspension of IWT unilaterally by India is against the treaty. It undermines the credibility of an international agreement. This discourages regional states from trusting cooperative mechanism, reinforcing unilateralism and "might is right" behaviour. India also went against the deal and gave 33 ft more height than allowed to its Lishanganga dam which again puts a question mark on the deals among the regional states.

4.7: Militarization of Water Politics:

With both India and China pursuing aggressive dam projects, water is no longer a developmental issue but a strategic one concerning National Security.

The region may see heightened military posturing near disputed rivers, increasing the risk of conflict in future.

4.8: Shift in Regional Alignments:

To counterweight India's water leverage, Pakistan may deepen its reliance on China. Bangladesh may also lean towards China for water security assurance if India is seemed neglecting the interest of downstream. Beijing's favor may increase and seeing this, other South Asian countries may also join the alliance.

5. Conclusion:

Together, India's suspension of the IWT and China's Brahmaputra mega-dam symbolize the water securitization in South Asia. The fallout will likely be; increased mistrust and hostility, shifting alliances, and weakening of cooperative institutions. If left unaddressed, these developments could make water the next major fault line in regional politics, with consequence not only for interstate relations but also for the lives of nearly 2 billion people dependent on these rivers.