

# INDIA - PAKISTAN WATER DISPUTE: AN ALARMING ISSUE

## OUTLINE

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The India - Pakistan water dispute is rooted deep in historical grievances and exacerbated by India's violation of Indus Water Treaty poses a great threat to regional stability, food security and human survival; resolving it with cooperation is crucial for peace in South Asia.

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## THE ESSAY

Ismail Serageldin, Vice President of the World Bank in 1995 rightly said, "The wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were fought over oil; the wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be fought over water." Wars on resources are as old

as time; however, a new found dimension in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the weaponization of water by upper riparian.

Many instances are there where the right of transboundary water to downstream areas is denied. In South

Asia, the conflict on water resources pose serious threat to a billion people depend on Indus Basin for agriculture, energy and drinking water. Since

Independence, India and Pakistan have remained locked in hostility, but conflict on water resources has become another flashpoint in their

long standing rivalry. The growing challenge of climate change, coupled with rapid population growth, has



intensified water scarcity across South Asia; moreover, the conflict of water resources is more than a **political fault line** following India's violation of Indus Water Treaty after Pabalgam incident. The India-Pakistan water dispute, rooted in historical grievances and exacerbated by India's violation of Indus Water Treaty poses a great threat to regional stability, food security and human survival; resolving it with cooperation is crucial for fore peace in South Asia.

One of the key disputes between India and Pakistan ever since independence is the contentious issue of water distribution. Just seven months after **independence**, India controlled the water flow of river **Sutlej** causing severe water scarcity in Pakistan for 5 weeks. However, issue was resolved after negotiations, the impending threat of water control loomed over Pakistan



as India controlled several water head works that flowed into Pakistan. Therefore, to resolve this issue with the help of the World Bank Eugene Black brokered this a **bilateral treaty** between India and Pakistan. In 1960, **Indus Water Treaty** was signed which gave autonomous control to India over **3 eastern rivers** of Ravi, Beas and Sutley and Pakistan attained unrestricted control over the western river: **Indus, Chenab and Jhelum.**

This treaty add a dispute resolution mechanism involving **Indus Water Commission** and **neutral observers** for bilateral resolution of conflicts. This treaty followed the true spirit of **Vienna Convention on the Law of the Treaties** by working on principle of *Pacta sunt servanda* (**Pacts must be kept**). Thus **International Crisis Group** rightly said, "It is one of the most durable international treaties having endured three wars between India and Pakistan without being



abrogated."

Indus Water Treaty faced a new found dimension of aqua aggression due to Modi aggressive policy of dam construction. Several projects on Western rivers have started with the purpose of storing and diverting water of Western rivers to Indian sites. For instance, **Wullar Barrage** on **Wullar lake** divert water of **Chenab** leading to **55% flow decline**. Similarly, many dams violate the height requirement. For example, in **2013**, a report presented by **International Court of Arbitration** provides evidence that height of **Kishanganga dam** is **33 feet taller** than prescribed height. In this way, India has violated the treaty multiple times. Yet Indus Water Treaty was still intact, the cracks started to appear after **2016 Uri attack** when Modi stated: **Water and blood cannot flow together**. After this, on multiple events he



claimed this treaty is restricting India's ability to have clean reservoirs and India will use western rivers for its development. Therefore, India used **Pahalgam** - a false flag operation - as an excuse to violate and suspend Indus Water Treaty unilaterally.

Although it is clearly mentioned in **Article 12** of Indus Water Treaty that **No country could unilaterally pull out of the treaty nor can annul it (nor can hold it in abeyance)**. It can be reversed only with bilateral consensus.

Thus, it is clear violation of **Article 26** of Vienna Convention on the Laws of Treaties.

The water disputes after suspension of Indus Water Treaty has taken an **alarming turn** due to Pakistan's dependence of these system. Pakistan covers **drinking, hydel and agricultural requirements from 95.8% of Total**



## Renewable Resource of Indus River.

As Pakistan is an agrarian economy and agriculture serves as backbone of economy, it is highly depend on transboundary water of western rivers. Agriculture constitutes 24% of GDP, 24.4% of exports and 31% of labour force; hence, any attempt of diverging rivers and storing water will pose water non-substitutable security threat to Pakistan. With India's water infrastructure on Pakistan it can hold water for atleast 40 days that will hurt Pakistan's supply of water in winter.

This situation of water scarcity can accelerate as Pakistan has structural insecurity. According to Indus River System Authority, Pakistan has the capacity of only 30 days to store water. IRSA warns of 21% water shortfall during dry season of winter posing threat to 90% cultivated land dependent on Indus.



River. Similar to agriculture, in hydel power generation obstacles have been noticed as in May for **Marala head works** the inflow dropped from **35600 to 3177 cusecs overnight.**

Likewise, in **Neelum River** pressure has dropped by **40%**, when India halt water from Kishanganga dam. Thus, India's weaponization of water of water at present cannot pose existential threat, but it can hurt Pakistan's economy and hydel generation.

With climate change pattern a new layer of stress is added to already serious water issue. Climate change is intensifying **monsoons**, leading to **unpredictable rainfall.**

Due to this unpredictability, data sharing between upper and low riparian is important for better disaster management and early warning system. Suspension of



hydrological data sharing will leave Pakistan unable to buffer during supply shocks resulting in increased droughts.

In case of dry spell, this water dispute will become alarming as Pakistan is on the verge of crossing the absolute scarcity line by 2025, according to UN reports. As a result of water scarcity,

intra provincial disputes of Sindh and Punjab will exacerbate. In the same

way, during extreme rainfall and reservoir flushing operations, the chances of flooding in downstream areas will increase. Hence, unilateral

manipulation of water is posing national, economic, security and ecological harm to Pakistan. Thus

as Ban Ki-moon, former UN Secretary General said, "Pakistan is one of the water stressed country and climate change is acting as a threat multiplier."



India's dream of becoming regional hegemon is putting billions of lives under threat. According to Nehru,

**"India must perish or dominate; perish it won't dominate it must."**

This mindset is exacerbating trans boundary water dispute. By suspending Indus Water Treaty, India is violating spirit of International law as Vienna Convention clearly states:

**"Every party in force is binding upon the parties and must be performed by them in good faith."** Thus, India's suspension is violating nuclear threshold<sup>id.</sup> allowing use of force under spirit of **UN Charter Article 40**. This can lead to regional instability as witnessed under May escalation.

Pakistan National Security Committee warn India of **full spectrum national response** in case India try to block or divert rivers. So the implications of **full fledged nuclear**



War cannot be separated amid water disputes. In 2019, the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) estimated that a 100 weapon exchange between India and Pakistan could kill up to 125 million people in the first week and threaten billions through food shortage. Thus, hawkish policies of Modi are derailing regional stability.

The implications of water disputes between India and Pakistan extend far beyond the borders. In a region where there are multiple nuclear powers, the water issues can increase further hostility, derail peace processes, and threaten to destabilize entire South Asian region. India is constantly trying to isolate Pakistan in international fora like in SCO Defense Ministers' meeting in Qingdao China, India try to point references to terrorism. By using multilateral



meetings to solve bilateral issues. India is trying to harm **regional integration** by hindering cooperation in **regional platforms** such as **SAARC** and **SCO**.

It prevents South Asia from moving towards **integration** and **collective development**. India's suspension of

treaty also weakens its demand for water diplomacy from China

on rivers like **Brahmaputra** and **Sutley**. The new found shift of

upper riparian from cooperation to confrontation will have deeper impact on relations of neighbouring countries

Instead of acting as a bridge for cooperation, water has turned into a division source and insecurity

Despite its alarming nature, the dispute can be managed with sincere political will and technical cooperation. Firstly both countries must ensure strict compliance with **Indus Water Treaty**, possibly with third



party monitoring trust. A **Joint Water Management Commission** of technical experts should be established to resolve issues scientifically rather than politically. Secondly, as both countries suffer through triple crisis of **water scarcity, mismanagement and mistrust**, there is need to revive **water talks**. Water talks need to include **regional water sharing framework and hydro diplomacy**. Thirdly, Pakistan on its part must adopt **modern water conservation policies** and invest in dams, reservoirs and modern irrigation techniques. Lastly, regional cooperation on climate change and glacial management is also vital. As **Kofi Annan** stated **Only cooperation can turn water from a source of conflict to a source of peace**. Above all, both states must depoliticize water and treat it as a humanitarian issue rather than a political issue.



In conclusion, water is no longer merely a natural resource; it has become an existential challenge for South Asia. The India - Pakistan water dispute, if left unchecked, could prove more dangerous than past wars fought over territory, because it threatens human survival at very cost. Dialogue, trust building and sustainable management of rivers are the only viable solutions. Water must be treated as instrument of peace. Only peace over water can become the step toward broader peace in South Asia.