

Q- Amid accelerating climate change and increasing regional securitisation of water, how are emerging water disputes among Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan reshaping South Asian geopolitics? In this context, critically assess claims of Indian 'water terrorism', Pakistan's flood vulnerabilities (2022), and the shifting global discourse on transboundary water management.

→ Introduction

Climate change and hydropolitics are remaking South Asia's strategic map as rivers become sources of cooperation and contestation. The Indus waters Treaty (1960) once anchored India-Pakistan water relations but now faces pressure from upstream projects, political strain, and climate shocks. Pakistan's 2022 floods exposed acute vulnerability, while Afghan developments add a new upstream dimension. The result is a more securitised, contested water ^{order} across the region.

Climate change +
Rising demand +
Upstream
Dams

IWT Strain +
Politicized Rhetoric
Water Terrorism

Data-sharing Breakdown
+
Humanitarian Vulnerability
e.g. 2022 Floods

Greater Regional
Securitisation
+
Geopolitical Risk

→ Emerging water disputes & regional geopolitics : Pakistan, India, Afghanistan

→ IWT's historical role and current stress :-

The Indus Water Treaty provided durable technical mechanisms for sharing rivers despite political wars. Over decades it resolved disputes through the Permanent Indus Commission and neutral experts. Today rising demands, climate variability, and new dams test its flexibility. The treaty's survival now depends on political will as much as technical rules.

→ 2022 floods revealed acute vulnerability :-

The 2022 floods affected one -

third of Pakistan and exposed weak resilience. "The floods showed how deeply vulnerable states are when infrastructure and governance lag behind climate shocks", Akbar Zaidi. Issues in Pakistan's Economy (2020). Damage estimates and humanitarian crises highlighted water-security fragility. Pakistan's recovery remains incomplete and costly.

→ India's upstream projects in HOJK alter hydrology

Dams and diversion like Baglihar, Rattle and new works in HOJK increases India's control over seasonal flows. Upstream storage changes timing and peak discharges that Pakistan relies on for saving and flood control. Even without malicious intent, altered release patterns ~~rise~~ raise downstream

risk. This technical asymmetry creates leverage in tense political moments.

→ "Water Terrorism" rhetoric and Securitisation :-

Accusations of Indian "water Terrorism" reflect water politicized framing.

"When water becomes weaponised in discourse, technical disputes turn into security crises", Anshu Lieven, Pakistan: A Hard Country (2012).

Such rhetoric inflames public opinion and narrows diplomatic room.

Labelling elevates the stakes of otherwise technical disagreements.

→ IWT abeyance episode as precedent risk :-

India's 2025 suspension / abeyance moves around the IWT created a

dangerous precedent by pausing cooperative mechanisms. Pakistan warned that unilateral flow restrictions would be treated as an "act of war". Breaking routine data-sharing increases misperception and humanitarian vulnerability downstream. The incident shifted water disputes management from technical to political terrain.

→ Climate Change magnifies hydrological uncertainty :-

Climate driven glacier melt and monsoon shifts change seasonal river regimes. "Climate variability turns predictable flows into strategic uncertainty for riparian states."

Bruce Riedel, Deadly Embrace (2011). Floods and droughts both become more frequent and severe.

This multiplies the political and

humanitarian costs of any
water dispute.

→ Pakistan's internal mismanagement
compounds risk

Inefficient reservoirs, canal losses
and weak water governance magnify
the impact of upstream actions
and climate shocks. Low storage
per capita and delayed dam
projects reduce buffering capacity.
Conservation, modernisation, and inter-
provincial coordination are urgent to
raise resilience. Domestic reform is
as vital as external diplomacy.

→ Afghanistan introduces a third
~~mismanagement~~ upstream vector

Afghan dam building and river
works create a new upstream
dimension. New upstream riparians

can convert hydrology into leverage
and diplomatic bargaining chips,

P.R. Chahi, (2003). Kabul's projects
on Kunar and Kabul tributaries
affect downstream Pakistani flow.

Pakistan now faces simultaneous
upstream pressures from two neighbours.

→ Operational Risk: withheld
data and broken chat channels:-

When treaty bodies or data-
sharing are suspended, early
warning for floods and irrigation
scheduling fails. The 2025
disruptions showed how reduced
transparency endangers lives and
crops. Restoring continuous
hydrological data exchange is
~~the~~ therefore a humanitarian
as well as diplomatic ~~para~~
imperative.

→ Political narratives harden domestic audiences

Domestic politics in both capitals amplify zero-sum frames. "Nationalist politics convert resource disputes into existential national issues, limiting compromise", Stephen P. Cohen, The Future of Pakistan (2011). Hardline rhetoric pressures leaders to take uncompromising stances. Public opinion thus constrains technocratic solutions.

→ "Water Terrorism" claim - Merits & Limits

Claims of deliberate water denial require evidence of intent, operational capacity and policy choice. While upstream control can be coercive, many flow changes reflect development choices and climate variability.

International law offers remedies,
but proving malign intent is
politically fraught. Broad accusations
risk inflaming conflict without
delivering remedies.

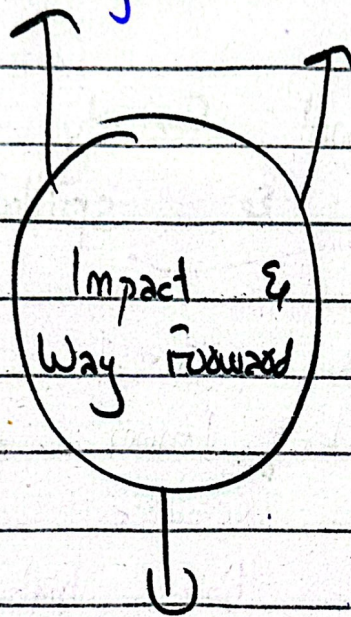
→ Regional Security
implications & spillovers

Water disputes intersect with
militancy, border tensions and great-
power rivalries. "Resource disputes in
insecure regions have higher chances
of militarisation and external
exploitation", Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan

Beyond the Crisis (2011).

Afghanistan's instability and external
patrons can magnify local
water tensions. Regional polarization
therefore increases escalation risk.

Immediate Humanitarian Crisis	Medium term legal disputes
Diplomatic Tit for Tat	Donor-Mediated Monitoring
Disrupted Irrigation	Strained Alliances



Way Forward:

- Treaty Adaptation
- Independent Monitoring
- Domestic Water Reform
- Basin Cooperation

→ Global discourse shifting toward Cooperation.

International water governance emphasises data-sharing, basin-wide science, and climate-adjusted rules rather than bilateral blame. Multilateral norms favour joint monitoring, benefit-sharing, and dispute-resolution mechanisms. Pakistan and India could learn on global practice to de-securitise disputes if political will allows.

→ Practical Confidence-Building Measures.

Measures such as independent monitoring, joint flood forecasting, and emergency release protocols reduce misperception. "Institutionalised cooperation and third-party monitoring can depoliticise shared-river management,"

Katherine Adeney, Federalism and Ethnic Conflict (2007). These tools are low cost ways to protect lives and build trust. Donor-supported technical platforms can bridge political gaps.

→ Trajectories: risk, adaptation, and diplomacy.

Absent reform and credible cooperation, water scarcity will fuel humanitarian crises and geopolitical friction.

With domestic modernisation, treaty adaptation, and basin-wide science, the region can manage shared risk. The future will hinge on whether politics yields to technical cooperation or whether securitised narratives dominate policymaking.

Conclusion

Emerging disputes among Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan combine climate shocks, upstream engineering, and politicised narratives to reshape South Asian geopolitics. Pakistan's 2022 flood trauma and India's treaty postures increased securitisation and humanitarian risk. De-escalation requires restoring data channels, investing in resilience, and adopting basin-wide, climate-aware governance. International norms and independent monitoring can help depoliticise rivers before water becomes a catalyst for wider conflict.

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