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BLOOD AND WATER CANNOT FLOW TOGETHER: THE INDUS WATER TREATY, PAHALGAM, AND RIVER POLITICS IN ASIA

In response to the April 2025 terrorist attack near Pahalgam, India suspended the 1960 Indus Water Treaty with Pakistan, which governs the sharing of vital water resources in the transboundary Indus River Basin. India probably lacks the upstream infrastructure necessary to cause serious damage to its neighbor, but the normalization of weaponizing water could put India itself in an awkward situation vis-à-vis China concerning the Brahmaputra River Basin and contribute to more dangerous situations along transboundary rivers like the Mekong, the Tigris–Euphrates system, or the Nile.

INTRODUCTION

On April 23, as part of India's first-wave diplomatic response to the April 22 terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Indian-administered Kashmir, New Delhi suspended the 1960 Indus Water Treaty (IWT) with Pakistan. After years of difficult negotiations mediated by the World Bank, the IWT governed the sharing of life-giving water in the Indus River Basin between India and Pakistan for more than half a century, surviving three major wars in 1965, 1971, and 1999, as well as countless smaller skirmishes between the two archnemeses. With Pakistan's agricultural base heavily reliant on the flow of the shared water, the Indian decision to suspend the IWT was widely seen as escalatory in nature, even if—to our knowledge, at the time of this analysis—water has not yet been diverted in any significant amount. In return for the IWT's restoration, India demands that Pakistan take more proactive steps against anti-India terrorist groups on its territory.

The genie is now out of the bottle in terms of weaponizing the treaty. This may prove a dangerous precedent even for India, which in the case of the Brahmaputra River is in the vulnerable downstream position vis-à-vis China. A general turn towards more confrontative river politics around the world could lead to growing tensions in several other developing regions, too, including the Mekong River Basin in Southeast Asia, the Tigris and Euphrates in the Middle East, water-stressed Central Asia, or the Nile in Northeast Africa. This analysis examines the background, significance, and possible future of the IWT and how its downfall could impact stability in regions where sharing freshwater is a point of significant potential tension.

THE INDUS WATER TREATY: WELCOME COOPERATION BETWEEN FOES

When former British India was divided into India and Pakistan in 1947, geographical dimensions, including hydrography, were all but ignored in favor of religious demographics. Consequently, the new configuration of state borders threatened major disruption to the use of the Indus River Basin, which runs through Pakistan but originates in India and passes through Indian-administered Kashmir—and on which much of Pakistan's food production depends.

Years of uncertainty marked by intermittent political tensions and various temporary agreements gave way to serious negotiations on a long-term solution in 1952, when the World Bank, in part inspired by the river-centric regional development model of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States, started mediating between the two countries. During the eight-year talks, Pakistan pushed for keeping colonial-era allocations, which would have favored the western (now Pakistani) parts of the historical Punjab region. India, in turn, proposed that the Indus and its two western tributaries, the Chenab and the Jhelum, be used by Pakistan while India utilizes the three eastern rivers, the Beas, Ravi, and Sutlej.

The final 1960 arrangement mostly followed this proposition, granting Pakistan and India near-exclusive rights to use 84 percent and 16 percent of the river basin's water, respectively, with the possibility for limited, expressly permitted use of each other's rivers. Pakistan, which lost access to the eastern rivers on which some of its irrigation systems depended, received

international support to build new canals to the western rivers. In addition, India was obliged to provide Pakistan with advance information about water levels and threats of floods or potential droughts. In one way or another, about 80 percent of Pakistan's agricultural base depends on the water and related information that flows from the Indian side.

During its 65 years, the Indus Water Treaty was considered one of the most successful—if not the most successful—transboundary water-sharing mechanisms in the world. Connecting two traditional enemies, it became a symbol of fruitful technical cooperation and reasonably equitable resource sharing even in highly conflict-prone settings. Compliance with the IWT remained steady even during the 1965, 1971, and 1999 Indo–Pakistani Wars, the Siachen conflict from the 1980s to 2003, and countless various border skirmishes in the 1980s, the 1990s, and the new millennium.

CHALLENGES FACING THE IWT

To be sure, the IWT did not go unchallenged. On the Indian side, there emerged a palpable sense that the country was too generous in sharing water with its neighbor. The issue was particularly sensitive in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)—a union territory since 2019—where the IWT's restrictions put severe limitations on the development of irrigation systems and hydroelectricity. Islamabad, on the other hand, objected to some of New Delhi's hydroelectric dam projects that it sees as endangering Pakistan's share of the water flow. Environmental changes have also posed a challenge. Himalayan glaciers are growing unstable, and meltwater is expected to peak around the 2050s. Combined with large population and demand, this makes the Indus one of the world's most vulnerable glacier-based water systems. The IWT's framework does not properly account for such twenty-first century ecological pressures.

Against this background, India and Indian state-level governments pushed for reviewing or suspending the IWT for over two decades. In 2003, the J&K Legislative Assembly adopted a resolution calling for the treaty's review. In 2016, in the wake of the Uri attack, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi famously said that "blood and water cannot flow together." In 2023, India officially demanded the IWT be renegotiated, alleging that Pakistan repeatedly broke the treaty's spirit and objectives—Pakistan rejected both the

demand and the allegation. Crucially, the IWT has no expiry date or clause under which the parties can withdraw, and any amendment requires unanimity.

In the legal sense, the treaty remains in effect even if one party unilaterally withdraws. India's April 2025 decision to suspend it is therefore in a legal gray zone. For the time being, it appears the IWT's suspension has not yet resulted in the diversion of water in amounts that would threaten a humanitarian crisis—in fact, India lacks the necessary upstream infrastructure, although the Chenab River's flow was restricted by closing sluice gates in the Jammu region as a "short-term punitive action." More crucial is the suspension of mechanisms like data sharing, joint oversight, and various forms of dialogue and cooperation. With over 254 million of its citizens and domestic stability on the line, Pakistan has called any diversion of the Indus or its tributaries an act of war and retaliated to India's suspension with the suspension of the 1972 Simla Agreement signed following the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War.

A RISKY PRECEDENT FOR WATER POLITICS IN ASIA

Having so far refrained from causing a humanitarian disaster, it is quite possible that India intends to use the combination of Pakistani fears and legal uncertainties around the IWT's suspension as elements of an eventual de-escalation strategy. Weaponizing long-established transboundary water-sharing mechanisms may, however, prove a dangerous precedent for many downstream riparian countries in Asia and around the developing world, not least among them India itself.

The Brahmaputra River originates in Tibet and flows through northeastern India to then merge into the Ganges in Bangladesh and empty into the Bay of Bengal. The Brahmaputra accounts for about a third of India's freshwater resources and over 40 percent of its (mostly underdeveloped) total hydropower potential. For the time being, Beijing, traditionally an ally for Islamabad, has shown some restraint in taking its long-time partner's side. But, much to India's angst, China is already investing in hydroelectric infrastructure in the river's upstream region and could ramp up its efforts to block the Brahmaputra's flow should its southern neighbor chose to severely escalate the situation in the Indus River Basin. China could further aid Pakistan in building additional dams in Pakistani-administered Kashmir,

which could limit the flow of water to the disputed territory's Indian-controlled segment. Political disruption due to floods or water shortages would be a major blow to Pakistan, but the same in Indian-administered Kashmir could be even more politically explosive.

The normalization of weaponizing river flows would of course have ramifications far beyond the China–India–Pakistan triangle. In Southeast Asia, downstream riparian nations along the Mekong River face an overwhelmingly dominant China that thinks little of limiting the flow of water by constructing massive hydroelectric projects, while small downstream countries are themselves easy to divide. In West Asia, downstream Syria and Iraq are at upstream Turkey's mercy when it comes to the flow of the Tigris and the Euphrates. In Africa, the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile has led to such a deterioration in Egypt–Ethiopia relations that speculations about a possible armed conflict have been periodically resurfacing since the late 2010s. In Central Asia, one of the world's driest regions, energy-rich but water-poor downstream countries and water-rich but energy-poor upstream countries quarrel.

In most cases, fundamentally good faith actors are at odds because of scarce water resources and uncertainties about how one's infrastructure development projects would affect the other's vital national interests. The intentional, bad faith weaponization of river flows is the exception. Should this change, however, delicate regional settings could easily become explosive.

ANY WAY FORWARD?

India probably lacks the water diversion infrastructure needed to ignite a large-scale humanitarian crisis in Pakistan. Acquiring such capabilities would require years of heavy investment. Smaller-scale negative ramifications may emerge, however, such as localized food and water scarcities, the forced movement of villages, and political disturbances. Being the cause behind such outcomes would lead to international displeasure that India, a proud emerging power and self-visioned leader of the Global South, does not want to attract. The challenge of terrorism due to porous borders with Pakistan, while a source of reasonable outrage in India, also highlights that India is not necessarily safer the weaker that Pakistan is. Undermining Islamabad's

ability to uphold stability in its territory may be gratifying in the short-term but does little to aid India's struggle against the spillover of armed radicalism into Indian-administered Kashmir.

In a more optimistic scenario, India's suspension of the IWA will be used as leverage in a hardball but overall constructive negotiation process reviving but altering previous arrangements. In the long term, it is both in India and Pakistan's interest to reach an arrangement that is more flexible, climate-proof, and equitable than the one from 1960s. Large-scale water pressure in the Indus River Basin would threaten the livelihood of 300 million people, likely resulting in disrupted agricultural chains, mass migration, electricity shortages, and possibly even large-scale armed conflict. To avoid such scenarios, data sharing about land use, human activities, and water flow should be expanded, possibly with the World Bank as a neutral third party to hold the two sides accountable. Water resources should be better quantified, so that their sharing can be better structured and so that their trading becomes possible. Some examples of similar forms of cooperation include the Mekong River Commission or the 2013 Senegal River Basin Multi-Purpose Water Resources Development Project. While such optimistic outcomes may seem naïve, it should not be forgotten that when the IWT negotiations started in 1952, India and Pakistan had only emerged from their latest war five years earlier.

If anything, IWT's history shows that even when pessimism is warranted, it does not need to be absolute. Even actors driven by bad faith in low-trust situations can be trusted to act in their own best interest. For Pakistan, a politically sustainable modus vivendi is a matter of national stability. For India, such an outcome would signify its rise as a new, responsible pillar of the global power structure. Just as severe pressure and even military actions have their place in a smart and assertive foreign policy, so does responsible and equitable behavior that establishes credibility for aspiring global actors like India.

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