

Original Article

Water, Politics and Peace: The Indus Waters Treaty in Retrospect and Prospect

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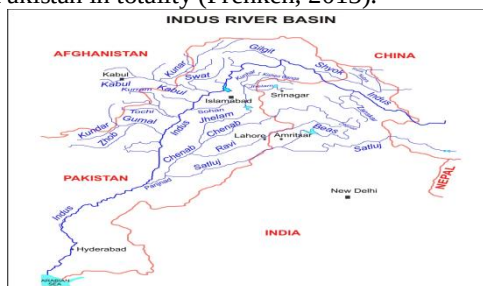
Abstract

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal." Life on Earth originated in water, and its absence precludes the sustainability of life. Water is essential for all facets of a nation's sustainability, impacting both the biological needs of its inhabitants and its economic framework. India and Pakistan are the two major countries in South Asia emerged as sovereign nations on the global stage, following the partition of the Indian subcontinent into two independent states in 1947. The distribution of river water resources constituted as a significant source of irritation among the two nations alongside the Jammu and Kashmir territorial issues. The Indus Water Treaty of 1960 was crucial in the allocation of rivers and water resources of the Indus River system between the two states and has endured throughout time. In light of the recent skirmishes and the resurgence of geopolitical tensions in the region, the situation has once again come under strain, leading India to place the Indus water treaty in abeyance. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the Indus Water Treaty, exploring its complexities and considering the future implications following India's response, as well as potential pathways moving forward.

Keywords: Water Disputes, Peace, Geopolitics, Indus Water Treaty, Diplomacy

Introduction

India and Pakistan are the two principal states in South Asia. They emerged as sovereign nations on the global stage in 1947, following the partition of the Indian subcontinent into two independent states: one established as a secular democratic republic and the other declared as a theocratic Muslim state (Pant, 2023). Despite common history, culture, ethnicity, languages, geography, and economic links, their relationship has been hostile and suspicious. India's stance as a responsible upper riparian state adhering to the Treaty is noteworthy; nonetheless, it faces pressure to reconsider the degree of its commitment to the Treaty amid increasingly contentious political ties with Pakistan. It is crucial to emphasise that the Treaty has remained "uninterrupted" due to India's facilitation of its operation (Sinha, 2025). The Indus River originates in the Tibetan Plateau from Bokhar Chu glacier in Kailash Mountain ranges, near lake Mansarovar and discharges into the Arabian Sea, with its basin extending from approximately 24° to 37° N latitude and 66° to 82° E longitude. The total length of the Indus River is approximately 3,200 km, draining area of approximately 1,165,500 sq km. in China, India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in totality (Frenken, 2013).



Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Indus River Basin and tributaries*. Adapted by author.



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Objectives

- To analyse the evolution of the Indus water dispute and the diplomatic negotiations leading to the Treaty and assess the effectiveness of the Treaty in managing India–Pakistan water relations amid contemporary political, technical and legal challenges.
- To analyse the future viability of the Indus Waters Treaty considering climate change, increasing water scarcity, and shifting regional geopolitics.

Methodology

To accomplish the study purpose and objectives, this paper primarily relies on secondary data sourced from publications, including books, monthly journals, online resources, , and research articles.

Historical Context: The Genesis of the Indus water Treaty

The conflict concerning the Indus waters originated well before the independence of India and Pakistan. It began as inter-state disagreements among Punjab, Sindh, Bahawalpur, and Bikaner (Michel, 1967). Subsequently with the formation of Pakistan in 1947, the conflict intensified into a matter of international significance between the two nations. The issue was exacerbated by the political border established through the Indus basin, designating India as the upstream and Pakistan as the downstream riparian on five of the six rivers in the Indus system. Although the portion of the boundary failed to consider the interrelatedness of river systems. Numerous headworks like Madhopur and Ferozepur were allocated to India which provided agricultural water to Pakistan were located within Indian territory, leading to initial conflicts. The dispute regarding the April 1948 water stoppage at the Madhopur headworks intensified tensions, validating Pakistan's concerns about hydrological reliance on India (Gulhati, 1973).

This event prompted both parties to engage in discussions facilitated by the World Bank. In a significant intervention by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) in a bilateral river dispute, the conflict was effectively resolved, and a comprehensive conflict resolution mechanism was instituted to address potential future issues

(Tripathi, 2009).

The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), signed in 1960 between India and Pakistan with the World Bank as a guarantor, is one of the longest enduring water-sharing accords globally. On September 19, 1960, the World Bank, under the direct involvement of its President Eugene Black, facilitated a water agreement between India and Pakistan. This agreement was signed by the representatives of both nations, the then prime minister of India Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru and president of Pakistan Gen. Ayub Khan, in Lahore. Notwithstanding wars, crises, and evolving geopolitical dynamics, the pact has persisted for almost sixty years. As water shortage escalates and political dynamics shift, a revitalised discourse on its significance and development has become imperative.

Provision of the Indus Water Treaty 1960

The Indus Waters Treaty allocated the waters of the Indus River System to India and Pakistan. It allocates control of the three western tributaries (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab) to Pakistan and the eastern tributaries (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej) to India. The Treaty (12 Articles and 8 Annexures) establishes the Permanent Indus Commission, which includes a commissioner from each nation, to cooperate and share information on river use. The Treaty also specifies processes for resolving issues (World Bank, 2018). Despite frequent criticism over its deficiencies, particularly its failure to avert or resolve extensive water-related tensions and disputes associated with specific water initiatives, the treaty still represented a mutually advantageous outcome, providing concrete advantages to both parties (Biswas, 1992).

Consequently, India gained control over approximately 33 million acre-feet (MAF), accounting for roughly 20% of the total waters of the Indus system, while Pakistan received the remaining 135 MAF, which is about 80%. The Treaty permits India to utilise Western Rivers, allowing for limited irrigation and unlimited non-consumptive uses, such as hydropower generation, navigation, fisheries, and flood control.

The treaty features a multi-tiered dispute resolution mechanism that is among the most sophisticated in water-sharing agreements, including the Permanent Indus Commission (PIC) for ongoing data exchange and negotiations. Neutral Expert (NE) serves as an impartial authority in technical disputes. Court of Arbitration (CoA) serves as a forum for resolving legal disputes. These mechanisms have been invoked multiple times, as seen in the Baglihar Dam dispute (Neutral Expert, 2007) and the Kishanganga arbitration (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2013).

Although the treaty appeared equitable, the reality was that India relinquished 80.52 percent of the total water flows in the Indus system to Pakistan. It is most likely one of the only treaties globally that encompasses both volumetric (water-sharing) and partitioning provisions along with that India provided £62 million to Pakistan for the construction of replacement canals from the western rivers. This kind of generosity is atypical for an upper riparian (Sinha, 2025).

The IWT has endured and survived several the test of time particularly the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War, the 1971 Bangladesh War, and the 1999 Kargil Conflict. The pact served as a stabilising mechanism, since neither nation want to turn water into a weapon of warfare, considering the nuclear threats and the economies reliant on extensive irrigation (Wolf, 1998).

The geopolitics of the Cold War and the post-World War II liberal framework influenced the resolution of the transboundary river problem. The World Bank acknowledges the pact as one of the most effective accords in resolving

water disputes. A significant number of individuals in India have historically perceived the distribution of 30 percent of the river's water to India, as the upper riparian nation, as inequitable. Nonetheless, the Indian government maintained the pact to promote collaboration and tranquilly (Ahmadzai, 2025).

The Contemporary Issues

The treaty, brokered by the World Bank during the Cold War to address the socio-ecological challenges of colonialism in the subcontinent, has withstood multiple crises among the competing South Asian states. The IWT faces difficulties in addressing contemporary climate, economic, and political challenges. Recent major water development projects in India, either completed or underway, have raised significant questions regarding the treaty's effectiveness, while the evolving geopolitical landscape poses challenges to the World Bank's capacity to uphold it. The suspension of the treaty presents India with an opportunity for renegotiation, whereas Pakistan encounters constrained options to maintain its existing status (Ahmadzai, 2025).

Challenges

For more than sixty years, the IWT has withstood numerous diplomatic failures, violent confrontations, and extensive conflicts between India and Pakistan, alongside rising nationalism from both nations, all without facing significant scrutiny from either side. The current faltering indicates a transformation not merely in the relations between India and Pakistan, but also in the broader geopolitical landscape of the region and the governance of shared water resources.

Despite numerous challenges, the Indus Water Treaty, signed between India and Pakistan in 1960, has endured six decades of hostility, even amidst four wars and significant tensions arising from Pakistan's persistent state-sponsored terrorism against India. For the first time since the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) was enacted, India has, on several occasions over the past two years, either issued notifications to Pakistan via the Permanent Indus Commission (PIC) or corresponded directly with Islamabad requesting amendments to the treaty (Haider, 2024). However, following the terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Indian leadership made a paradigm shift by deciding to place the treaty in "abeyance" until Pakistan permanently ceases its support and sponsorship of terrorism in all forms.

Indus Water Treaty in Abeyance

On 23 April 2025, India suspended the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) of 1960 with Pakistan, placing it in abeyance under specific circumstances. The action was taken in response to the Pahalgam incident in India, executed by an Pakistan-based terrorist organisation, amid the ensuing military buildup. The Indian government referenced national security issues and Pakistan's purported endorsement of state-sponsored terrorism as justifications for its action.

Whether the suspension will be revoked or withdrawn, or if India will choose to exit the agreement entirely, remains a matter of speculation at this time. India has consistently demonstrated its role as a responsible neighbour; however, the current action of "abeyance" serves as a legitimate measure for India to exert pressure and urge Pakistan to amend its misguided conduct (Chellaney, 2025). The suspension will not have any immediate implications. The suspension of the treaty unilaterally by India has resulted in ceasing the sharing of hydrological data, which is essential for the lower riparian states as it includes major parameters such as water flow, snowmelt, and river discharge represent. with suspension India is also not bound to any limitations on the utilisation of the Western rivers, specifically the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab. In the wake of continued suspension of the IWT, India will have the opportunity to expand or develop new storage or hydropower projects and regulate water flow with greater flexibility. India has the potential to restrict or halt the flow of water into the Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, or Sutlej rivers in the future by redirecting water into canals and channels or by increasing storage levels in its current dams and reservoirs. Modifying the existing infrastructure will significantly enhance Indian agriculture and irrigation (Mathur, 2025).

Conclusion

The nature of the dispute-ridden diplomatic relations between India and Pakistan, water has become an issue of contention subject to developmental nationalism and geostrategic considerations. This unilateral strategy cultivates distrust and exacerbates a security related vicious cycle. The IWT was initially conceived as a technical remedy for the subcontinent's political issues however, it is evident that only a political breakthrough can facilitate the necessary technical interventions. It can be contended that the complete abrogation or substitution of the treaty "lacks any logical coherence," a position endorsed by numerous scholars and academics of this field. It is essential for countries to unite in addressing 21st-century challenges in the Indus Basin, which, in addition to climate change, stem from the primary factors of demography, technology, and economy. Agreements and treaties regarding trans boundary river water sharing between nations have consistently been intricate, fraught with controversies and disputes. It necessitates reciprocal comprehension, trust, and collaboration among the signatories for its enduring viability.

The Indus Waters Treaty demonstrates the feasibility of collaboration in regions characterised by significant animosity. However, the world that created the IWT no longer exists. Climate change, new developments in technology, ecological degradation, and evolving political dynamics necessitate a progressive strategy. Although the treaty is improbable to be discarded, its existing structure falls short of addressing the complexities of the 21st century. The future stability of the region hinges on the ability of India and Pakistan to transcend a zero-sum viewpoint, fostering instead a collaborative, adaptive approach to climate-resilient hydrodiplomacy. The enduring legacy of the

IWT lies not merely in its longevity but also in the profound lesson it imparts: the possibility of water cooperation persists, even amidst the apparent challenges of political collaboration. The existing Indus Waters Treaty framework, characterised by unilateral trust and an imposition of obligations on India without reciprocal advantages, has demonstrated ineffectiveness and requires replacement. The current situation lacks the spirit of goodwill and friendship that originally underpinned the foundations of the IWT. The cremation of LeT and JeM terrorists with full state honours, alongside the attendance of senior Army officers, political figures, and police personnel, indicates that these individuals in Pakistan can no longer be classified as non-state actors, but rather as state actors.

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