

Water wars looming? Indus crisis and South Asian stability

Nayab Khalid | 22nd May, 2025



A rare paradigm of cooperation between India and Pakistan, the Indus Waters Treaty, which was brokered by the World Bank in 1960, has remained operative against the backgrounds of wars, decades of tension, and ever-present nuclear rivalries. For over sixty five years, within the context of this tortuous treaty, there have been divisions of the six rivers in the Indus basin—three eastward rivers for India and the remaining three for Pakistan.

While the treaty has been put to the test on numerous occasions, it has survived even the worst of times. However, after the latest attack in Pahalgam (Illegally Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir) that killed tourists and drew sharp accusations from New Delhi, India has taken this extraordinary step: Turning off the tap. For the first time, it suspended water flows for 24 hours, then released a surge to Pakistan, plunging the treaty into uncharted waters.

The sudden, unilaterally induced pulling of the buffer water from a joint resource would qualify as weaponisation, with consequences that might go way beyond bilateral relations. Pakistan is one of the most water-stressed nations in the world and relies on the Indus River system for 75% of its freshwater requirements, which supports 90% of agricultural production, the engine of her economy and food security.

Suddenly, halting and releasing these water supplies would cause havoc in Pakistan's irrigation systems, leading to crop failure in the short term with an eventual cascading effect into economic collapse and mass rural-to-urban migration in the long term.

The Indian side, however, too has its share of water-related disadvantages: Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh depend on these river systems for irrigation and hydropower generation. Of Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh, agriculture and energy are deeply connected with the Indus basin. Extended interruptions of the treaty premises may invite measures in retaliation from Pakistan, which could range from contesting the hydropower projects in India to reiterating disputes in international corridors.

Climate change has already increased the strain on the dwindling water availability in the basin; making the Indus a political battleground may hence expedite the ecological degradation of the river and reduce its flows for both countries in the long run.

Ultimately, unpredictability for irrigation and hydropower generation may emerge for India's water-dependent northern states, threatening food security and economic stability. While India may have gained in the short run by destabilizing treaty operations, it would have lost the long-term game concerning sustainable water management in times of resource scarcity.

As it unilaterally changes the conditions of the Indus Waters Treaty, the rare article of mutual cooperation in a relationship torn with conflict, India could face credibility loss not only as a reliable negotiation partner with Pakistan but also at the expense of other downstream nations like Bangladesh and Nepal.

Future agreements related to water-sharing even those related to the Ganges or the Brahmaputra could fall under such doubt, with comparable coercive measures being feared by the neighboring countries. The loss in trust may lead Pakistan and other regional players to look to China for alternatives on water security, further isolating India geopolitically.

The current crisis has emerged in the changing order of increasing climate change, which is putting tremendous stress on the water resources of South Asia. The Himalayas, comprising the Indus basin, show very alarming rates of glacial retreat, as different patterns have made water somewhat unpredictable in terms of availability. These environmental transformations turn water, which is a renewable resource, into a scarce commodity, thus raising stakes in all possible conflicts over its distribution.

The particular volatility of the situation is, of course, rooted in the nuclear dimension: both countries have significant stockpiles and have come perilously close to an all-out war in the past. History suggests that water disputes can escalate quite rapidly; the temporary interruption in 1948 of the flow of water to Pakistan by India almost instigated an armed

conflict, only ending after international mediation between the two countries.

This crisis has its ramifications across the entire South Asian neighborhood, which can create potential flashpoints within the region.

The ultimate upper riparian controller, China, could, through the water flows, exercise similar pressure on India, which already has an existing dispute across its border. Recent constructions of dams by Afghanistan on the Kabul River can also stir friction with Pakistan, while a move by Pakistan in this context to draw further claims on Kabul to compensate for dwindling Indus flows would widen an already volatile relationship.

While the action will be happening in Northeast India, Bangladesh watches nervously from the sides, as the action would not just create a precedent but could also be used in future disputes involving shared rivers between the two nations. Geopolitical scenarios have become more troubling since South Asia has more than a quarter of the world's population but holds only about 4% of its freshwater resources.

The treaty's original mediator, the World Bank, finds itself in an exceptional position to assist mediation, but with the political climate, mediation requires Herculean efforts. Possible advances might be tied to watering flows in a phased manner with verifiable counterterrorism measures or the establishment of new monitoring mechanisms to enhance mutual confidence. There have also been suggestions among some specialists for a review of the Treaty itself within the framework of modern challenges, such as climate change and population growth, which could not be envisaged in 1960.

Yet, with the patriotic fervour at an all-time high in both countries, surrounded by domestic political considerations, the art of diplomacy will need its finest touch to find any face-saving way out.

This crisis is at the heart of a test on whether cooperation can overcome confrontation in one of the most volatile regions of the world. The Indus Waters Treaty survived several wars because both parties believed that water was too essential to reward itself with political disputes.

But today, the Treaty is under unprecedented stress. If diplomacy fails and water is weaponized forever, it might set a dangerous precedent impacting global norms in how scarce resources can be commandeered as coercive tools in an age of climate change. In the weeks to come, whether or not India and Pakistan will be able to pull back from the brink or whether the entire cooperation mechanism erected over the last sixty-five years will disintegrate, with resonating consequences well beyond South Asia.

As the former Vice President of the World Bank, Ismail Serageldin, once said, “The next world war will be over water.” In a world plagued by increasing water scarcity and geopolitical tensions, an uncertain future for the Indus Waters Treaty may provide grim lessons about the limits of confrontation and the necessity of cooperation in an interconnected world.

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