

Preserving Leverage

Pakistan's Strategic Options for Water Security Under the Indus Waters Treaty

Policy Brief

Water security in Pakistan faces growing challenges from climate change and India's increasing non-compliance with the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), including its unilateral belligerent decision to put the treaty in abeyance. These developments not only heighten regional strategic instability but also threaten agricultural and socioeconomic stability. This policy brief examines these risks and outlines a comprehensive, coordinated national and international policy approach to safeguard Pakistan's water resources in the long term.

Executive Summary

Water constitutes a vital national resource for Pakistan, which remains vulnerable to both climate change and India's tactics to manipulate flows in the western rivers. Currently, India lacks the technical capability to either stop or manipulate these water flows; however, continued construction of dams with increasing *de facto* storage capacity, the refusal to share relevant data as agreed under the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), and underlying aspirations to divert the Chenab flow pose concerns for Pakistan's water security. While technical experts in Islamabad are skeptical of India's ability to stop and divert flows of the western rivers,¹ arguing that both capability and geographical constraints limit its capacity, policy practitioners are not complacent with this thesis and remain vigilant. India's unilateral action to put the IWT in 'abeyance' serves as an alarm for Islamabad, which reflects growing concerns about New Delhi's aspirations to monopolize water in the region and use it as a strategic lever against Pakistan. In this regard, Pakistan must engage in water diplomacy both at the global and regional levels while simultaneously incorporating water into its strategic discourse, thereby complementing its diplomatic efforts.

Introduction

Water security is closely intertwined with social stability and national prosperity. Any constant threat to a country's water resources can potentially result in social unrest and undermine internal order. Pakistan's water security is fundamentally linked to the Indus River System, which depends primarily on glacial melt and monsoon rainfall, both of which are vulnerable to climate change. Exacerbating these inherent vulnerabilities is a persistent challenge from India, where the fast-paced development of hydroelectric power projects (HEPs) on the western rivers has become a growing source of concern because of their *de facto* storage overcapacity, which could enable New Delhi to manipulate flows in the coming decades, if not today.

In 1960, the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) was concluded to address these water concerns between the two hostile neighbors. By clearly separating and allocating different rivers to each country (eastern rivers² to India and western rivers to Pakistan), and by defining infrastructure design rules, operational rules, and dispute-resolution mechanisms, an effort was made to bridge the deep trust deficit and put an end to

¹ Under the Indus Waters Treaty, the western rivers means the Indus, the Jhelum, and the Chenab taken together (Article I (6)).

² Under the Indus Waters Treaty, the eastern rivers were allocated to India which included the Sutlej, the Beas, and the Ravi while Pakistan received the western rivers including the Jhelum, the Chenab and the Indus.

water controversies.³ Although confusion regarding the interpretation of treaty provisions persisted, serving as a basis for repeated recourse to third-party dispute resolution, it largely served its purpose in resolving conflicts amicably.⁴ However, following the Pahalgam attack on April 22, 2025, India immediately announced to put the treaty in ‘*abeyance*’ on April 23, reflecting that it was waiting for an opportunity to retract itself from a longstanding treaty commitment by using a false flag operation to justify its non-compliance and malign Pakistan. It is important to note that India’s unilateral action of putting the treaty in ‘*abeyance*’ lacks any legal basis under the IWT,⁵ meaning it remains in blatant violation of its treaty commitments and, hence, the treaty itself. This belligerence has raised serious concerns in Pakistan about its water security.

In this context, two competing perspectives have emerged in Pakistan’s public discourse and are outlined here for academic clarity. One school of thought, dominated by technical experts in hydrology and geology, is *skeptical of India’s ability to stop and divert flows of western rivers, arguing that both capability and geographical constraints limit its capacity. The other perspective, as argued by strategic and policy practitioners, is not complacent with the former thesis and wants to remain vigilant. They believe in adopting proactive policy and diplomatic measures to annul the “abeyance”*. In the past and recently, a faction of technical experts believed that events such as India’s *de facto* suspension of the treaty would provide Pakistan with an opportunity to exit the IWT, as they perceived it would help restore water flows from eastern rivers, particularly the Sutlej.⁶

They thought that this could be done through treaty revision, a new agreement, or reliance on international law. However, this view received little traction due to many serious consequences for Pakistan, which may not be able to restore flows from eastern rivers as wished and may end up in a quagmire.

In this regard, the *core argument is that Pakistan’s interest in securing its waters lies in soliciting compliance by India regarding its treaty commitments*. The thrust of water diplomacy should be to encourage other states to require India to comply with its commitment to a rule-based order and global peace, given that water remains a strategic, economic, and humanitarian interest for Pakistan. Any infringement of IWT by India could escalate into an armed conflict. In this scenario, Pakistan remains a responsible nuclear state, seeking to avoid any misadventure fueled by India.

The section below presents an outline of proactive diplomatic engagements with different countries, the rationale, and the intended outcome. It also outlines several internal measures to ensure long-term water security.

Policy Actions Required at the National and International Levels

Pakistan needs to take two endeavors simultaneously, one at the national level and the other at the international level. Moreover, the national efforts will complement global efforts. The two policy tables summarize these proposed guidelines that must be considered at the national and international levels.

³ Ashfaq Mahmood, *Hydro-Diplomacy: Preventing Water War Between Nuclear-Armed Pakistan and India* (Islamabad: IPS Press, 2018), 172.

⁴ The Baglihar Dam dispute was resolved in 2007 by appointing a neutral expert while arbitration on Kishanganga and Ratle is currently underway in the International Court of Arbitration.

⁵ Article XII (4) provides that the treaty “*shall continue in force until terminated by a duly ratified treaty concluded for those purposes...*”

⁶ Muqem Islam, “Mitigating India’s Hegemonic Agenda – Water as Weapon: Multidimensional Strategic Analysis of the Indus Water Treaty,” *Journal of Public Policy* (summer 2025).

A. Policy Actions at the National Level

Policy Domain	Problem Identified	Recommended Actions	Expected Outcome
International legal capacity	<p>There is increasing reliance on foreign legal teams and consultants to contest Pakistan's cases in international courts.</p> <p>This results in a lack of institutional memory and understanding of local realities. It also creates an added financial burden.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a permanent unit on international law, with separate wings for water law, marine law, natural resources, etc. • Invest in training and building the capacity of national legal and technical experts. • Unless this national resource is fully operational, retain selective foreign counsel for support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced reliance on foreign experts to contest cases. • Reduced financial expenditure. • Faster, more coherent litigation responses. • National robust capacity in international law will gain strategic autonomy.
Legal strategy on ongoing projects	<p>Indian HEP construction continues on the western rivers, while the decision in the Arbitrations Case (PCA Case No. 2023-01) remains pending.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore other interim restraint mechanisms such as economic or diplomatic pressure. • Seek procedural leverage within the Court of Arbitration framework. • Devise and coordinate legal and diplomatic actions to pressure India, as underlined in the second table below, preventing the construction of current and upcoming projects. • Collection of all data in a timely manner to prove globally and in court the importance and utilization of western rivers in Pakistan, demonstrating its strategic significance for the country. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention of <i>fait accompli</i> outcomes. • Preservation of the effectiveness of final awards.
Water as a national security issue	<p>Water is not effectively incorporated into the strategic discourse. While the National Security Policy recognizes that 80% of the Indus water basin originates outside Pakistan, making access to transboundary watercourses a national security imperative, there is a need to actively incorporate water security in security dialogues and agreements.</p> <p>India has accelerated HEP on western rivers while simultaneously supporting Afghanistan's efforts to build a dam on the Kunar River.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate water security into deterrence and crisis management discourse and strategies vis-à-vis both India and Afghanistan. • Treat flow manipulation as strategic instability vis-à-vis both India and Afghanistan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This will enhance the credibility of the threat of force and deterrence posture. • Also, give greater weight to global diplomacy, soliciting increased global pressure on India.

Strategic communication	<p>Currently, the narrative on water security is fragmented and weak.</p> <p>Ministries, academia, political discourse, and diplomats all operate in silos.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align ministries, academia, and diplomats on one page that water security is a strategic concern, currently being under threat from both India and Afghanistan. Develop a unified strategic roadmap of proactive global engagement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coherent and unified national position. Stronger international advocacy.
Public awareness and capacity building	<p>Limited public understanding of water security and efficient water use.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness campaigns linking water security to national survival. Farmer training programs. Training programs for youth regarding the country's water resources, sources of threats, and the way forward. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Domestic political support for long-term reforms. National unity on a single stance against India regarding water issues, as divided narratives will divide domestic support.

B. Policy Actions at the International Level

Target Stakeholder	Strategic Rationale	Recommended Policy Actions	Intended Impact
European Union	<p>EU prioritizes rule-based international order, legal predictability, and humanitarian norms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frame and project India's defiance as a violation of international treaty law. Highlight the threat to global peace and order posed by India's irresponsible regional conduct. Underline humanitarian risks to downstream communities. Facilitate EU delegations' visits to potential affected areas in Pakistan. Engage EU think tanks, academia, and legal forums. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Normative pressure on India. Increased scrutiny of India's treaty compliance. Reinforcement of the legal legitimacy of Pakistan's case. Narrative building in favor of Pakistan.
United States	<p>Strategic interest in regional stability and nuclear risk mitigation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Present the water monopoly by India as a strategic risk to conflict escalation. Emphasize consequences for regional peace and US investments. Engage Congress, the State Department, and strategic think tanks to pressure India to halt its HEP projects and fulfill its responsibilities under the IWT. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elevation of the water dispute into a strategic dialogue. Quiet diplomatic pressure on India.
China	<p>Glacial sources are shared regionally, with China as the upper riparian state, particularly with respect to India. It also wields significant regional influence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote a regional forum and norms with China on transboundary water governance, either with or without India. Engage Chinese academia and policy institutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pressure on India via the regional forum and norms. Increased legitimacy of downstream rights discourse. Increased pressure to

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight the rights of downstream states and the responsibility of upper riparian states. 	act responsibly as an upper riparian.
Middle East (Gulf States)	India maintains strong economic and labor ties with the Middle East, whereas Pakistan's strategic ties with the region are growing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pakistan should integrate water security into bilateral strategic dialogues with Gulf states. • Raise awareness of escalation risks. • Encourage quiet diplomatic signaling to India to keep its belligerence in check. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indirect diplomatic pressure. • Expanded strategic leverage for Pakistan.
Bangladesh	Lower riparian to India. The Ganges Water Treaty, a water-sharing agreement between India and Bangladesh, is set to expire in December 2026.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore joint academic and Track-II engagements. • Promote shared concerns on flow manipulation. • Support regional water norms and dialogue with China. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regionalization of downstream water concerns. • Reduced Indian monopoly over water narratives.
Nepal and Bhutan	Both are upper riparian to India, but remain politically and economically constrained.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track-II diplomacy and academic cooperation. • Comparative research on hydro-hegemony. • Promote regional water forum and dialogue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gradual erosion of India's regional water dominance. • Expansion of Pakistan's narrative.
Afghanistan	Pakistan shares the Kabul and Kunar rivers with Afghanistan, where Indian involvement is increasing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish strategic clarity and balance vis-à-vis Afghanistan. • Initiate bilateral water dialogue in good faith, but clarity must be established when and if to back dialogues with strategic leverage as the upper riparian on the Chitral (Kunar) River. • Offer technical cooperation and capacity support. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid dealing with water issues with Afghanistan in siloes and incorporate them as part of a broader strategy. • Avoid coercive diplomacy as much as possible; instead, leverage cultural and religious linkages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced vulnerability on the western front. • Prevention of compounded upstream pressure. • Reduced Indian involvement on the western front.

Conclusion

To ensure its water security, Pakistan must adopt a multi-pronged approach, pursuing active diplomacy globally and undertaking robust capacity-building and governance measures internally. A passive reliance on a decade-old arbitration case to clarify the implications of 'abeyance' on the ongoing proceedings is not sufficient to safeguard its water security in the long run, even if the Arbitration Court's decision comes in Pakistan's favor. The central challenge is not only the

legal interpretation of the IWT in the Arbitration Court, but also India's compliance with the agreed terms, which remains belligerently defiant. Moreover, it is important to note that international litigation against India is not enough; it must be supported by proactive diplomatic engagement to avoid *fait accompli* outcomes.

Additionally, it is pertinent to underline that the use of force remains a last and undesirable option. Resorting

to coercive measures would prematurely exhaust other strategic measures, including diplomatic and regional engagements. Internally, robust water governance and investment in strengthening legal and technical

capacity are crucial to reducing overreliance on foreign legal experts. Most importantly, integrating water security into strategic planning is the most vital element to complement diplomatic efforts.



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