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Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Indus Waters Treaty: Preventing Water from Becoming a Weapon

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Water is the source of life. No individual, community or nation can survive without it. Unlike oil, gas or minerals, water cannot simply be replaced by another commodity. For an agrarian country such as Pakistan, the waters of the Indus Basin are not merely an economic resource; they are the foundation of food security, livelihoods and national survival.

It is therefore deeply disturbing that the Indus Waters Treaty, one of the world's most durable examples of cooperation between two otherwise adversarial states, has become the latest arena of confrontation between India and Pakistan.

The issue is no longer simply about the construction of a dam or the technical design of a hydroelectric project. It is about whether one state can unilaterally use control over a shared river system to exert political pressure on a downstream neighbor.

The Indus Waters Treaty was signed at Karachi in 1960 after years of negotiations facilitated by the World Bank. It divided the six rivers of the Indus system between the two countries: the Western Rivers—Indus, Jhelum and Chenab—were allocated principally to Pakistan, while the Eastern Rivers—Ravi, Beas and Sutlej—were allocated to India. The Treaty nevertheless permitted specified

uses by each country of rivers allocated to the other. It also established the Permanent Indus Commission and elaborate procedures for resolving differences and disputes.²

Remarkably, the Treaty survived the wars of 1965, 1971 and 1999 and decades of political hostility. Its endurance demonstrated an important principle: even bitter enemies can agree that some necessities of human existence must remain outside the battlefield. However, that principle is now under unprecedented pressure.

The Abeyance Controversy

Following the alleged Pahalgam 'terrorist' attack in April 2025, India announced that it was placing the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance. Pakistan rejected the move as unilateral and contrary to the Treaty's spirit. Pakistan's position is supported by the Treaty itself, which contains detailed provisions for modification and termination rather than providing a simple mechanism for unilateral suspension. Pakistan has also argued before the United Nations that the Treaty remains legally binding.³

In light of this, the legal battle has produced important developments. Pakistan's arbitration proceedings before the Court of Arbitration under the Permanent Court

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² World Bank, "Fact Sheet: The Indus Waters Treaty 1960 and the Role of the World Bank," June 11, 2018, last updated June 21, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/brief/fact-sheet-the-indus-waters-treaty-1960-and-the-world-bank>

³ United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in the Middle East, S/2025/809, 2025, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4096196/files/S_2025_809-EN.pdf

of Arbitration continued despite India's refusal to participate. In June 2025, the Court determined that India's declaration of abeyance did not affect the Court's competence.⁴ In August 2025, the Court ruled on important questions concerning the interpretation of the Treaty.⁵

Then, on 31 August 2026, the Court issued an award specifically concerning the status of the Indus Waters Treaty following India's decision to place it in abeyance, together with an order concerning interim measures relating to the Ratle hydroelectric project.⁶

Pakistan therefore has a substantial legal argument on its side. But there is an uncomfortable reality in international relations: a favorable legal ruling does not automatically produce compliance. India has rejected the arbitration process and has continued to maintain its position on the Treaty. This is where law encounters power.

The Human Cost of Water Politics

A recent side event on the margins of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva has brought the humanitarian dimension of the dispute into sharper focus. Experts warned that the uncertainty surrounding the Treaty could threaten water security, agriculture, livelihoods and the rights of millions of people dependent on the Indus Basin. They emphasized that rivers are not experienced merely by governments; they are experienced by ordinary people whose drinking water, crops, health and livelihoods depend upon them.⁷

That is an important distinction. A river may appear on a map as a line separating sovereign territories. On the ground, however,

it is a living system. Farmers do not grow crops according to diplomatic boundaries. Cities cannot manufacture drinking water because relations between two capitals have deteriorated. Children cannot drink legal arguments.

For Pakistan, the stakes are particularly high. Agriculture remains heavily dependent upon irrigation from the Indus Basin. Water shortages therefore have implications not only for farmers but also for food prices, rural employment, industry, electricity generation and the broader economy. The danger becomes even greater in an era of climate change, population growth, glacial uncertainty and increasing water stress.

Can India Really Turn Off Pakistan's Water?

There is also a need for realism. Political statements suggesting that India can immediately stop every drop of water entering Pakistan should not be confused with engineering reality. India's existing infrastructure does not provide it with the instant capacity to completely block the flows of the Western Rivers. Building the massive storage and diversion infrastructure required to substantially alter those flows would take years. Recent reporting has similarly noted that India's existing dams cannot simply block the rivers, although they can regulate the timing of releases to a degree.⁸

Yet, this does not make the threat insignificant. A country does not have to stop a river completely to cause serious disruption. The timing of releases can matter greatly for agriculture, especially during critical sowing and growing periods.

⁴ Permanent Court of Arbitration, "PCA Press Release – PCA Case No. 2023-01: Proceedings under the Indus Waters Treaty (Islamic Republic of Pakistan v. Republic of India)," June 27, 2025, <https://pca-cpa.org/en/news/pca-press-release-pca-case-no-2023-01-proceedings-under-the-indus-waters-treaty-islamic-republic-of-pakistan-v-republic-of-india-3/>

⁵ Permanent Court of Arbitration, "PCA Press Release – PCA Case No. 2023-01: The Indus Waters Western Rivers Arbitration (Islamic Republic of Pakistan v. Republic of India)," August 11, 2025, <https://pca-cpa.org/en/news/pca-press-release-pca-case-no-2023-01-the-indus-waters-western-rivers-arbitration-islamic-republic-of-pakistan-v-republic-of-india/>

⁶ Permanent Court of Arbitration, "PCA Press Release – PCA Case No. 2023-01: The Indus Waters Western Rivers Arbitration (Islamic Republic of Pakistan v. Republic of India)," August 31, 2026, <https://pca-cpa.org/en/news/pca-press-release-pca-case-no-2023-01-the-indus-waters-western-rivers-arbitration-islamic-republic-of-pakistan-v-republic-of-india-6/>

⁷ Anwar Iqbal, "Indus Waters Treaty Abeyance Puts Millions at Risk, UNHRC Event Warns," Dawn, October 3, 2026, <https://www.dawn.com/news/2034445/indus-waters-treaty-abeyance-puts-millions-at-risk-unhrc-event-warns>

⁸ Agence France-Presse, "India 'Actively Working' to Deprive Pakistan of Water," Dawn, June 11, 2026, https://epaper.dawn.com/DetailImage.php?StoryImage=11_06_2026_012_002

Future storage and diversion projects could increase India's ability to regulate flows.

The strategic problem is therefore not only today's water quantity; it is the possibility of creating a future architecture in which Pakistan's water security becomes increasingly vulnerable to decisions taken upstream. That is precisely why the dispute must be treated as a strategic and humanitarian issue rather than simply a technical disagreement over dams.

What Does Pakistan Mean By "Water Will Not Be Weaponized"?

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has made clear at the international level that Pakistan will not accept the weaponization of water. Pakistani officials have repeatedly argued that attempts to stop or divert Pakistan's treaty-entitled waters would have grave consequences for regional peace and security. Pakistan has also formally told the United Nations that it reserves its inherent right of self-defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter in the event of aggression.⁹

A Multi-Layered Response to India's Water Weaponization

An important question remains: How can Pakistan prevent the weaponization of water? The answer cannot simply be: by going to war. War should be the last resort, not the first instrument of water diplomacy.

Pakistan possesses several layers of response before reaching that point:

1. International Law: Islamabad should continue to pursue every available legal mechanism and ensure that the PCA proceedings, Treaty provisions and principles of international water law remain central to the international discussion.

2. International Diplomacy: The United Nations, World Bank, major water powers

and international financial institutions should be made fully aware that the erosion of the Indus Waters Treaty threatens not merely bilateral relations but a wider principle of transboundary water governance.

3. Political and Diplomatic Mobilization among Downstream and Water-Stressed States: Pakistan should build a coalition around the principle that rivers shared by sovereign states cannot become instruments of coercion.

4. Strategic Resilience at Home: Pakistan cannot protect its water security merely by protesting India's actions. It must reduce its own vulnerability through water conservation, improved irrigation efficiency, better reservoir management, groundwater regulation, reduction of agricultural wastage and a transition towards less water-intensive crops where feasible.

There is also a deeper lesson. Pakistan has historically behaved as though the water available to it from the Indus system would remain constant. Climate change and population growth have made that assumption untenable. The country needs a national water-security strategy comparable in importance to its energy and defense strategies.

But What If All Else Fails?

This is the most dangerous question. Would Pakistan go to war if India actually attempted to substantially deprive it of its treaty-entitled waters? Pakistan has already publicly warned that an attempt to stop or divert the flow of water belonging to Pakistan under the Treaty would be treated as an act of war.¹⁰

That declaration creates deterrence, but it also creates a dilemma. If Pakistan declares that water diversion constitutes an act of war, it must simultaneously make clear that

⁹ United Nations Security Council, S/2025/263, 2025, <https://documents.un.org/access.nsf/get?DS=S%2F2025%2F263&Lang=E&Open=>

¹⁰ United Nations Security Council, S/2025/263, 2025, <https://documents.un.org/access.nsf/get?DS=S%2F2025%2F263&Lang=E&Open=>

its preferred response remains diplomatic, legal and international. Otherwise, a dispute that should be managed through institutions could acquire its own escalatory momentum. At the same time, Pakistan cannot reasonably be expected to accept a situation in which a vital resource necessary for the survival of its population is deliberately and substantially withheld without consequence.

The challenge, therefore, is to establish a credible ladder of response—from diplomacy and arbitration, to international pressure and economic measures, and ultimately, if faced with an existential attack on its water security, the exercise of the inherent right of self-defense recognized under international law. The objective should not be war; the objective should be to make war unnecessary. For years, India has been threatening Pakistan to bleed it by using asymmetric warfare, including hydro warfare. In 2016, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi threatened Pakistan by stating that “blood and water cannot flow together”. The statement must be seen as a policy statement, suggesting India’s impulsive nature and refusal to abide by international legal norms.

In light of such blackmailing acts, Pakistan should take all the necessary legal, diplomatic, and technical measures by denying India the pleasure of hegemonic satisfaction in the region. However, if all efforts prove futile, then in its rightful legal standing, Pakistan can treat Indian hydro-aggression as an act of war, requiring staunch measures.

The Indus Should Become a Bridge, Not a Battlefield

The Indus Waters Treaty was born in an era when India and Pakistan were bitter adversaries. Its survival for more than six decades was proof that rationality could prevail over hostility when both sides recognized that certain interests were

existential and shared. The Treaty should therefore be preserved, not dismantled.

India’s perceived concerns about terrorism and security should be addressed through appropriate political, diplomatic and security mechanisms. Pakistan’s legitimate concerns about water security should be addressed through the Treaty and international law. One problem cannot be solved by creating another.

Water is different from territory. A lost piece of territory can perhaps be reclaimed through diplomacy or negotiation. A lost harvest cannot be recovered after the season has passed. A dead crop cannot be resurrected. A dried river cannot be persuaded to flow by political rhetoric.

The Geneva discussion has rightly brought the human dimension of the Indus crisis to the forefront. Experts warned that millions of people could be affected by the weakening of the institutional arrangements governing the river system. That warning deserves to be heard far beyond Geneva. The Indus does not belong to governments alone. It sustains farmers, workers, children, cities and entire communities on both sides of an international frontier.

The ultimate test of statesmanship is not how effectively a country can weaponize a natural resource. It is whether it can prevent that resource from becoming a weapon in the first place. Pakistan must therefore defend its water rights firmly, legally and internationally, while simultaneously strengthening its own water resilience. India, for its part, must recognize that unilateral control over a lifeline of a downstream population may produce short-term leverage but carries long-term consequences for regional stability.

There should be no water war between nuclear-armed neighbors. The Indus must remain a river of life—not become another front in the India-Pakistan conflict.

