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The Indus Waters Treaty: A Critical Analysis of Water Security and Geopolitical Tensions

Mehdi Shah

ABSTRACT

The water resources of the Indus River basin are vital to Pakistan's agricultural economy. One of the most contentious issues between Pakistan and India after the 1947 partition of British India was water distribution. In 1960, the World Bank mediated the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), which laid the groundwork for the management of river waters that cross international borders. As an uncommon instance of collaboration between the two adversaries, the treaty has persisted through decades of political animosity. However, things have become so bad lately that it is about to happen. Indian officials accused Pakistan of complicity after 26 people were killed by terrorists in Pahalgam, India. As a measure of extraordinary reprisal, India threatened to cut off the water supply to Pakistan and suspended the IWT on April 25, 2025. Because of this escalation, a nuclear war between the two nuclear-armed neighbors is now very likely. Cutting off the water supply will have a devastating effect on Pakistan, especially in the agricultural and hydroelectric power industries, which are already struggling to cope. There would be devastating humanitarian, ecological, and geopolitical effects from using water as a tool of political manipulation. Reforms to treaties and diplomatic action are urgently required, as this paper demonstrates. The IWT's demise might set off a chain reaction of regional disasters if there is no international mediation or cooperative governance. Halting water from becoming a weapon of war requires immediate global action.

Keywords: Indus waters treaty, India-Pakistan water conflict, Geopolitical tensions, Water security, Nuclear escalation

Introduction

The Pacific Institute, a California-based think tank, has the largest database for keeping track of water-related conflicts around the world. Since ancient times, the Water Conflict Chronology has kept track of more than 1,900 acts of armed violence that were connected to water resources and processes. About 90% of all recorded events have happened since the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the past few years, there have been a lot more conflicts around the world. The years between 2000 and 2011 had about four times as many battles as the years between 2012 and 2021. In 2023, violent events were 50% more common than they were in 2022, which had already seen almost twice as many acts of conflict as the year before.

There has been a spike in conflicts regarding water on a global scale. Throughout the majority of the 1900s, cooperation among states about water resources far exceeded disagreement. Researchers from Oregon

State University looked through international relations records from 1948 to 2008 and found more than 2,500 events involving water that happened between states. They found that disputes were more common than cooperative interactions between countries in the ratio of two to one. However, it looks like this trend has begun to fade away. The conflict-cooperation balance has changed over the last 20 years, according to a new dataset that extends the analysis to 2019. Conflicts involving transboundary waters have surpassed international acts of cooperation since 2017. The terrible cost of conflict in the twenty-first century is mostly reflected in this increasing tide of violence. Wars frequently use water as a weapon or as a by-product of the battle. Water supplies have been deliberately targeted by fighters in several conflicts, including in the ongoing civil war in Syria and Iraq and in the ongoing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These groups have seized or destroyed water networks in order to gain an advantage over their opponents. Water supplies, ecosystems, and infrastructure have all been devastated by Russia's barbaric invasion and Israel's ruthless war on Hamas, putting the lives of the people in Ukraine and Gaza at risk.

"Water, like religion and ideology, has the power to move millions of people. Since the very birth of human civilization, people have moved to settle close to it. People write, sing, and dance about it. People fight over it. All people, everywhere and every day, need it" (Mikhail Gorbachev). Water is a vital resource that will always be crucial. Life as we know it can survive on Earth because of water. Restoring world peace and keeping our planet safe also depend on people getting ahead financially and living better. It is thought to be very important in human history, faith, and craftsmanship all over the world. People of all religions consider it a divine gift bestowed upon humanity through their holy texts. Because water has no clear boundaries, it can be a source of strife.¹

There are about 261 international river basins that cover about half of the world's land area. Almost 40% of the world's population lives in transboundary river basins. It causes stress and problems for the countries in the area when people use and share it. With help from the World Bank, India and Pakistan were able to come to an agreement called the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). This deal divided the water from the Indus River and its tributaries. Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Ayub Khan of Pakistan signed it at Karachi on September 19, 1960.² With a combined mean yearly flow of 41 billion cubic meters, the three "Eastern Rivers" (Beas, Ravi, and Sutlej) are within India's jurisdiction, according to the treaty. Pakistan now has authority over the Indus,

Chenab, and Jhelum, also known as the “Western Rivers,” which together flow a total of 99 billion cubic meters per year. As much as 70% of the river water went to Pakistan and 30% to India.³ India can use the water from the Western Rivers for nonconsumptive uses, such as irrigation, navigation, power generation, floating infrastructure, and fish farming.⁴ This is recognized by the treaty. It spells out in great detail the rules that India must follow when building things that go across the Western Rivers. In an effort to maximize collaboration, goodwill, and the efficient use of water from the Indus River system, the treaty’s preamble acknowledges the respective rights and responsibilities of each nation. Pakistan is concerned that India could trigger natural disasters in Pakistan, such as floods or droughts, particularly in the event of a war, despite the fact that the treaty has nothing to do with Pakistan’s national security.

Despite multiple armed conflicts between the two nations since the treaty’s signing in 1960, the majority of issues have been resolved under the treaty’s legal framework.⁵ The Indian government initially suspended the treaty on April 23, 2025, in response to the Pahalgam¹ incident of that year.⁶ Despite experts agreeing that the IWT needs to broaden its scope to tackle climate change and update some technical standards, it is still regarded as one of the world’s most successful water-sharing accords. Pakistan expressed its disapproval of India’s new Chenab River dam project to the World Bank, claiming that it violates the IWT and that India may potentially utilize the reservoirs to cause Pakistan to experience artificial water shortages or floods. The Pakistani government denied and condemned the allegation made by Nitin Gadkari, a senior leader in the ruling BJP and the Union Minister for Water Resources, following the Pulwama attack in 2019. Gadkari also threatened to redirect all water flowing into India to punish Pakistan. According to Kumar Singh and Amin,⁷ the Union Minister of State for Jal Shakti Rattan Lal Kataria stated that “every effort is made” to redirect the water away from the three designated rivers.

On April 22, 2025, following a targeted terrorist attack in Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir, the Government of India, in a meeting of the

Cabinet Committee on Security, declared the suspension of the IWT with Pakistan, citing national security concerns.⁸ In their 2022 paper titled “Pakistan-India Water Conflict: A Causal Analysis,” Robina explored various dimensions of hydropolitics between the two countries, along with the historical context of their water dispute. The paper also addressed interprovincial and interstate dynamics, as well as short-term and climate-related issues. However, it did not delve into the broader geopolitical consequences that could arise if a war were to break out between India and Pakistan over water. This paper makes the case that tensions between India and Pakistan have been rising since the Pahalgam attack, and the suspension of the IWT leads both states to the brink of war. These tensions are continuing to make South Asia less stable, mostly through nuclear threats, and political deadlock, as well as analyzing the broader geopolitical consequences of a potential armed conflict over water. This paper discusses specific countermeasures, findings, and suggestions.

Research Question

- If India were to suspend the IWT, how would it affect its bilateral relations with Pakistan, as well as regional water security in South Asia, and what would be the environmental and geopolitical consequences of this decision?

Research Objective

- To analyze the strategic, political, and environmental consequences of deteriorating India-Pakistan relations, particularly in the context of postconflict escalation, such as the suspension of the IWT, and to assess their impact on regional security and cooperation in South Asia.

Literature Review

In the twenty-first century, security dynamics have changed, and nontraditional security issues have become just as important as traditional ones. Of all the nontraditional challenges, water scarcity is the most basic and serious one. Water scarcity is the degradation of water supplies on a global scale, caused by many things like the world’s rapidly growing population and urbanization, poor management of water supplies, and climate change. Water insecurity is a result of many things, the most significant of which is water depletion, which the world is currently facing. The scarcity of water resources has a big impact on human health and regional stability.⁹

In 1991, Boutros-Ghali, who was Secretary-General of the UN, said, “The next war will be fought over water, not politics.” Chairperson of the Global Water Partnership Ismail Serageldin, on the other hand, said, “If this century’s wars were over oil, the next century’s will be over water—unless we change how we manage this precious and vital resource.” The problem of not having enough water is getting

¹ On April 22, 2025, there was a terrible terrorist attack in the Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir. 26 individuals were killed, including 25 Indian tourists and a Muslim pony ride operator from the area. Attackers with AK-47s and M4 carbines went after tourists, allegedly picking out some people because of their religion. At first, the Resistance Front said they were responsible, saying they were against the policies of the Indian government in Kashmir, but they later took back their claim. After the attack, people in the area helped with rescue efforts, and security forces began large-scale operations to catch the criminals. The attack has made things worse between India and Pakistan. India has suspended the Indus Waters Treaty, and both countries have sent diplomats to the other country. International players, such as Russia and Iran, have offered to mediate to stop things from getting worse.

worse, according to Ban Ki-Moon, who once served as Secretary-General of the UN. He told the World Economic Forum in January 2008, "A lack of water resources could lead to more conflicts in the future." The problem will get worse because of both climate change and a growing population. People will be seeking income more as the world economy gets better. There will be a lot more disputes ahead.

For years, strategic experts have been warning that war is likely to break out in the future over something as fundamental as water. There were 507 water-related conflicts in the past 50 years, as reported in the 2002 United Nations World Water Development Report. There was bloodshed in about 37 of them, with 21 escalating into full-scale war. These predictions are increasingly becoming harsh realities, according to a series of standoffs in South Asia in the previous nearly two decades. This has worrying implications for peace in the area and the world at large. Water is essential for the continued operation of current infrastructure, the realization of agricultural potential in the Indus basin, and the advancement of social and economic conditions in both water-scarce Pakistan and India.

The Indus basin has been a cultural hub for a very long time, and Pakistan and India both share it. Even though there are almost 25 million people living in this area, it has recently had some of the worst human growth scores in the world. The agricultural sectors of both countries depend on water from the Indus basin, which is very important to their economies and way of life. It is particularly devastating for Pakistan because it is the world's second-most water-stressed country, after China, and its holding capacity is the lowest.¹⁰ India also has other water sources to choose from, such as the Ganga-Jamna, the Brahmaputra, the Cauvery system, and others. Pakistan relies solely on the Indus River basin for its year-round water supply. Pakistan is one of the governments whose political survival will be seriously jeopardized in the next decade due to water scarcity, according to a UN warning.¹¹

Pakistan has a very large assessment. The Indus River was meant to belong to Pakistan, but now it flows through India. In order to send water to Pakistan, the head might be hurt very severely. These results show that the skills are weak. India leverages its position as a hydro-dominion. In these situations, changes in the amount of water that is available are likely to last. That means that a strong, long-lasting, and cost-effective peace between Pakistan and India is less likely to happen. It is disappointing that Pakistan is having problems with water and with the military. As with any water issue, there are causes and possible outcomes to think about. There are too many people, not enough water, and it is not clear what will happen in politics. Since the Indus River is a country's primary source of water that is safe for consumption, it is being used up quickly and in unpredictable ways. It is possible that the unsustainable water system is to blame for the Indus River's declining flow. The melting of

the Himalayan ice caps is being impacted by climate change and proximity to Pakistan. Undoubtedly, it is extensive monitoring of Pakistan. It is possible to exploit India's hydro-dominion of the Indus River to divert water supplies to Pakistan. This monitoring hints at the precarious power that India wields as a hydro-dominion. Controversy over water resources is likely to persist in this context, casting doubt on the prospect of long-term, economically stable peace between Pakistan and India.¹²

The real task is not just signing the treaty but also putting its provisions into action. Indian and Pakistani water experts and officials have been very open about their dislike of the IWT ever since it was put into place. Critics in Pakistan argue that the IWT disproportionately favors India.¹³ Iyer¹⁴ and other Indian experts agree that Pakistan is getting too much out of the deal. In reality, both states' claims are based on two different ideas about how to handle water around the world. India thinks that giving Pakistan 80% of the water goes against the idea of "equitable utilization,"ⁱⁱ which is something that India supports. In contrast, Ali¹⁵ says that Pakistan argues the IWT goes against the ideas of "historical use" and "no appreciable harm" because it only gave Pakistan 80% of the water, even though Pakistan had 90% of the irrigated land. Regardless of other contributing factors to the ongoing tensions between Pakistan and India, the water treaties and agreements about how the water rules should be applied have been a big part of keeping the fire going. Pakistan and India came to a deal to share water, called the IWT, with the help of the World Bank. General Ayub Khan, who was president of Pakistan at the time, and Jawaharlal Nehru, who was prime minister of India at the time, signed the treaty in Karachi on September 19, 1960.¹⁶

The 1960 IWT was seen as an example of how to control water across borders, and it made it through two wars between nuclear rivals. This is one of many actions India has taken against Pakistan because it says Pakistan supports terrorism across the border, which Pakistan strongly rejects. However, this is the first time either side has threatened to suspend the flow. It is also worth noting that India is the country upstream, which gives it a geographical edge. At times of high flow, experts say India is unable to halt the tens of billions of cubic meters of water that flow through its Western Rivers given current infrastructure limitations. It does not have the huge holding facilities or long canals that are needed to move such large amounts of water. However, what does the suspension really mean? Could India stop or change the flow of water in the Indus area, cutting Pakistan off from its primary

ⁱⁱ Equitable utilization is the fair and reasonable use of shared natural resources by all riparian (bordering) governments. Transboundary water bodies are one such resource. It guarantees that no nation uses the resource for the benefit of another at negative effects. The idea advances mutual gain, sustainability, and teamwork.

source of food and water? And does it even have the power to do that? It has also hit back with reciprocal measures against India and said stopping water flow “will be considered as an act of war.”¹⁷

Methodology

The *narrative review method* is used as the main research method in this paper to investigate the complicated issues surrounding the IWT and the growing political problems between India and Pakistan. In this case, the narrative review method is used to show how the IWT has changed over time by looking at important events and choices that have affected how the treaty is put into action and the problems it faces now. The researcher chose the narrative review technique to examine the IWT from multiple disciplinary angles, including history, politics, economics, and the environment. It provides a more nuanced picture of the treaty’s development than systematic assessments by allowing for flexible examination of several sources, such as academic studies, government documents, and news articles. When dealing with complicated, long-term problems, this method shines because it prioritizes qualitative insights above quantitative data. However, it runs the danger of selection bias due to its absence of strict methodological requirements. Its strength, meanwhile, is in placing the IWT within larger environmental and geopolitical storylines, which helps to overcome this restriction. The evaluation draws attention to the treaty’s merits, shortcomings, and potential dangers by incorporating many perspectives. Ultimately, this approach provides a critical and comprehensive analysis of water conflicts that span international borders in South Asia (Tables 1 and 2).

This table shows the study plan and the sources of the data, to ensure methodological clarity.

Table 1 Research plan	
Goal	Explanation
Combining Different Points of View	Utilize sources from various disciplines to examine the economic, military, and socio-environmental dimensions of IWT.
A Full Picture	Provide a comprehensive analysis of IWT challenges and solutions, integrating data that might not align with a single analytical framework.
Contextual Analysis	Situate IWT within the broader context and the geopolitics of South Asia.

Table 2 Sources of data	
Source Type	Description
Academic Papers	Peer-reviewed journal articles providing theoretical frameworks, case studies, and empirical data on various aspects of IWT.
Government Reports	Official publications from Pakistani and Indian authorities detailing policy and commitments.
Policy Briefs and Think-Tank Publications	Reports from international think tanks and research institutions offering expert analyses on IWT economic, geopolitical, and social dimensions.
Media Reports	Reputable media sources providing real-time updates and the latest developments related to IWT.

The IWT is looked at from different fields of study in this paper, using a narrative review method and data from economics, security studies, and environmental analysis. These academic papers give us theoretical and practical information about water management and transboundary disputes. This information helps us put the IWT in a bigger picture of geopolitics and the environment. These sources help examine evolving issues such as dam construction and water scarcity.

India and Pakistan’s government reports are also used to analyze how the treaty is being implemented, as well as national policies and tensions in the area, especially when it comes to water use and security. These official papers help us learn more about how both countries handle their water resources and what the treaty’s rules mean for politics. The paper also includes policy briefs and think-tank reports that give expert opinions on the economic and geopolitical aspects of the IWT, as well as possible diplomatic solutions to current conflicts. Lastly, news stories give real-time updates on important events and record how people and the government are reacting. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the IWT by combining information from many different sources. It talks about its problems and possible answers while looking at the bigger picture of South Asia’s politics. The narrative review method allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the issue.

Findings

The IWT is a landmark agreement that governs the distribution of water from the Indus River system between India and Pakistan. Under this treaty, India controls the waters of the three Eastern Rivers—Beas, Ravi, and Sutlej—while Pakistan controls the three Western Rivers—Indus, Chenab, and Jhelum. The treaty initially aimed to reduce water-related tensions between the two countries and provide a framework for resolving disputes. While the treaty has largely succeeded in its role as a conflict management tool, it has recently come under strain due to changing geopolitical dynamics and environmental challenges, particularly in light of India’s dam construction on the Chenab River and the potential for future water shortages.¹⁸ The suspension of the IWT in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack on April 25, 2025, has escalated tensions between India and Pakistan, placing the two nuclear-armed nations on the brink of a potentially catastrophic war. With both sides having mobilized significant military forces and signaling readiness for full-scale confrontation, the current crisis presents a level of danger far surpassing the previous Indo-Pak wars of 1948, 1965, and 1971. In the present context, any conflict between India and Pakistan would not be limited to conventional warfare. Given the presence of nuclear capabilities on both sides, the humanitarian, environmental, and geopolitical consequences could be catastrophic. Millions of civilians would be at risk of death or displacement, and both nations’ military personnel

would suffer substantial casualties. The conflict would rapidly transcend bilateral borders, impacting the broader South Asian and Southeast Asian regions.¹⁹

There has been discussion of a “water war”ⁱⁱⁱ between India and Pakistan for years. Both countries have nuclear weapons, which makes any potential conflict exceedingly dangerous due to the risk of nuclear escalation.²⁰ A military conflict over water supplies would be terrible for both countries and for South Asia as a whole.²¹ The human costs would be huge, with millions of people being forced to move to other places, agriculture losses, and countries could nearly collapse. Additionally, a nuclear war between Pakistan and India could involve nearby nations like China and Southeast Asia, making the political turmoil in the region even worse.²² With these terrible risks, it is clear that going to war over water would be catastrophic and must be averted at all costs. As Kolenda²³ says, a military war would have no winners and would be devastating for both countries politically, economically, and socially.

Impacts on Agriculture, Energy Security, and Regional Stability

One of the key findings is that Pakistan’s economy is highly dependent on the water flowing from the Indus River system, with approximately 80% of its water usage dedicated to agriculture. Crops like cotton, which account for over 60% of Pakistan’s exports and 8.5% of its GDP, rely heavily on water from these rivers. A reduction in water flow, especially during critical growing seasons, could severely impact agricultural output, leading to economic distress.²⁴ Furthermore, the potential disruption of water flow could have significant consequences for Pakistan’s power sector, which relies on hydroelectricity from major dams such as Tarbela, Mangla, and Neelum-Jhelum. Any reduction in water availability would compromise these energy sources, driving up electricity prices and worsening Pakistan’s already fragile power sector, which is mired in \$4.4 billion of circular debt.²⁵ The situation becomes even more concerning considering the regional and global implications. Pakistan’s dependency on Indus waters is so critical that any disruption could trigger widespread unrest, exacerbating socio-economic issues and potentially leading to larger geopolitical tensions. India’s recent moves, such as building dams on the rivers feeding into Pakistan, have raised concerns that India could use water flow as leverage in political disputes. This has sparked fears in Pakistan that India could intentionally withhold water, further destabilizing the region.

Economic and Environmental Fallout

The primary effect would be that trade would stop altogether. Trade by land, sea, and air would all stop

while the war was going on. Important shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea would become dangerous, which would have a major impact on trade between countries. Also, air travel would be greatly affected; flights would be rerouted, and both national and foreign airlines would incur significant financial losses because they would have to cancel routes, pay more to run their businesses, and get fewer passengers. Such disruptions would ripple across the economies of the surrounding region, especially to China and other countries that depend on trade routes in South Asia. A conflict like this would have huge effects on the economy. Food and energy shortages would get worse, supply lines would break down, and prices would go up very quickly. The damage to the environment would be huge at the same time, with loss of biodiversity, pollution, and ecological degradation making things worse in the area. India and Pakistan would both have to rebuild their businesses, infrastructure, and military capabilities after the war, which would be a massive reconstruction effort demanding substantial financial and human resources (Figure 1).

The figure above clearly shows the geopolitical layout of South Asian countries, and if war broke out between Pakistan and India, the whole region would face catastrophic consequences. Additionally, there will be a disturbance in Southeast Asian straits, which will severely affect trade due to the prevalence of conflict in the Arabian Sea.

The Wider Economic Risks of Indo-Pak Conflict in Southeast Asia

The relationship between Pakistan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has yet to realize its full potential. Despite Pakistan’s internal and regional challenges, it is crucial not to overlook the importance of strong ties with ASEAN. Pakistan should adopt an integrated approach to foster genuine cooperation, coordination, and collaboration with ASEAN. Working closely with the ASEAN Secretariat and the annual chair, while engaging in extensive consultations with all ten member states will be key to moving toward deeper engagement. By focusing on areas where it has expertise and comparative advantage, Pakistan can enhance ASEAN-Pakistan connectivity, support business communities, promote tourism, advance cooperation in science and technology, and deepen cultural exchanges, thereby realizing the true potential of this important partnership. Pakistan’s exports to ASEAN amount to \$3 billion, while imports stand at \$8.8 billion. 90% of Pakistan’s trade with ASEAN is concentrated in five countries: Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia (PIVOT, a quarterly magazine of the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, 1st August 2024).

The entire Southeast Asian region would be deeply affected by an Indo-Pak confrontation, especially if it were to escalate into a full-scale war. Given its strategic importance as a maritime commerce route linking Asia, Africa, and Europe, the Indian Ocean is ripe for potential instability and insecurity. Significant interruptions,

ⁱⁱⁱ The term *water war* is colloquially used in media for some disputes over water, and often is more limited to describing a conflict between countries, states, or groups over the rights to access water resources.



Fig 1 | Map of South Asia

Source: Updated from map courtesy of University of Texas Libraries, 2008

such as blockades, rerouting, or even direct attacks, could impact trade vessels passing through this region. Maritime trade will face significant obstacles, impacting key Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. India and Pakistan are important economic partners for many Southeast Asian countries because of the trade of raw materials, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and agricultural items. Prolonged hostilities have the potential to interrupt supply chains, which might cause essential commodity shortages, price inflation, and the suspension of operations for multinational corporations with regional interests. Businesses may temporarily halt operations, investments could fall, and regional economic growth would take a hit—just one example of how a war between two countries can have far-reaching consequences.

Diplomacy and Mediation in Preventing Regional Crisis

The stakes are high! Dialogue and diplomacy must take center stage. International organizations like the

UN and the World Bank, as well as regional organizations like the ASEAN and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, need to mediate so that the two nations may settle their differences amicably and permanently. The terms of the mediated agreement should be reasonable and take into account the concerns of both Pakistan and India. Immediate action is necessary to resolve the dangerous situation surrounding the IWT. If water-sharing agreements fail, it might have devastating effects on the economy, the ecology, and international relations. In order to secure the future stability and prosperity of the region, it is critical that India and Pakistan put an emphasis on conversation rather than war. They should collaborate with support from the international community to discover a peaceful solution that benefits both countries. Human rights agencies and regional and international organizations play an increasingly vital role. We must immediately seek out methods to prevent conflicts, such as compensation systems, confidence-building initiatives,

and third-party mediation. The region is on the brink of a humanitarian and geopolitical catastrophe with worldwide ramifications unless peace initiatives are launched and maintained promptly.

Discussion

Pakistan receives about 80% of its water supply from the Indus River, making it one of the world's biggest drainage systems. In Pakistan, this water is used to water about 16 million hectares of fields, or 80% of the country's farmland.²⁶ However, there is a critical concern. The water level in the Indus River's Tarbela Dam is already very low. Indian farmers might not be able to plant important crops like cotton and paddy on time if India decides to hold back more water in its reservoirs. Water shortages would directly impede crop production, and the cotton output could go down even more. That is important because over 60% of Pakistan's exports are cotton, and 8.5% of its GDP is cotton. Both of these things are already under a lot of stress. It might also have an effect on Pakistan's huge cloth industry. Also, India already controls 65% of the world basmati trade, leaving Pakistan with 35%. Con-

sequently, Pakistan could lose some of its basmati rice market share to India. This gap could get even bigger if Pakistan's rice crop fails. Then there's power. Pakistan does use a lot of coal, but the country wants to double the amount of green energy it uses from 33% now to 50%. Much of this green energy comes from hydroelectricity, which is the main green power source in the country.

The Indus and Jhelum rivers are an important source of power for large hydropower plants like Tarbela, Neelum-Jhelum, and Mangla. If the flow of water slows down, it could make it harder to make energy, hurt factory production, especially in the cotton and sugar industries, and raise the price of electricity even more. That is bad news because Pakistan's power sector already has \$4.5 billion in circular debt, which means that delivery companies could not get customers to pay their costs, which led to more unpaid bills all along the supply chain and a mess with the sector's finances. Pakistan's energy costs have gone up by 150% since 2021 just to keep the lights on. Another spike could be dangerous because people in Pakistan are very sensitive to price changes when it comes to energy. If prices



Fig 2 | Dams constructed on Chenab and Jhelum rivers

Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

go up by 1%, people will spend 0.3% less. On top of that, the power sector is very weak and relies heavily on loans from outside groups like the IMF. It is now more than \$130 billion in debt to other countries, but the country only has \$8 billion in foreign exchange savings, which is barely enough to cover 1.5 months of imports. Any significant problem in the power sector could quickly escalate into a full-blown revenue issue. It is easy to see how conflicts regarding water could lead to a bigger mess in the economy (Figure 2).

The situation surrounding the IWT is extremely delicate, and recent developments—like India's construction of dams on rivers flowing into Pakistan—are intensifying tensions. Figure 2 shows that India has built dams and hydroelectricity projects on the Chenab and Jhelum rivers. For example, the Kishanganga hydroelectric power project is on the Jhelum River, and Baglihar, Salal, and Kiru are on the Chenab River.

The projects listed below are being carried out by a partnership between NHPC^{iv} and the Jammu and Kashmir State Power Development Corporation. They are Pakal Dul (1,000 MW), Kiru (624 MW), Kwar (540 MW), and Ratle (850 MW). India began maintenance work on the Baglihar Dam and closed the sluice gates, which reduced the flow of water to Pakistan by up to 90%, according to a National Hydroelectric Power Corporation official. The first mega-hydropower plant, Kishanganga, is in the northwest Himalayas in the Gurez valley. It will soon be shut down for major repair, which will stop all water flow downstream of it. India has made steady work on four hydropower projects in Jammu and Kashmir that use the Chenab River and its tributaries. The projects should be ready for use in 2027–2028. The Baglihar Dam has been a source of disagreement between the two neighbors for a long time. In the past, Pakistan has asked the World Bank to mediate the dispute. Lawyers and diplomats have scrutinized the Kishanganga Dam, especially when it comes to how it affects the Neelum River, which flows into the Jhelum. If the treaty were to be suspended or if water flow to Pakistan was significantly reduced, the consequences would be catastrophic. Pakistan, being an agricultural country, heavily relies on the waters of the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab rivers for irrigation. Agriculture is central to Pakistan's economy, and any disruption in water supply would devastate crops, livestock, and livelihoods, plunging millions into poverty.²⁷

If this were to happen, it would have devastating economic effects on the entire region, not only Pakistan. Significant discontent could be sparked by the agricultural crisis, which could lead to a quick escalation of tensions between Pakistan and India. This may easily escalate into a nuclear war, causing unfathomable human agony, because both nations are nuclear-armed. Some scholars have speculated about the possibility of nations going to war over shared water

supplies, calling it a “water war.”²⁸ The repercussions of a war of this kind would be absolutely disastrous. Even if water flow is interrupted, the human cost will be noticeable right away. Both nations' economies would collapse, and millions of innocent people would perish.

Nobody would win such a conflict. It would be a lose-lose situation. Politically, economically, and socially, it would be disastrous for both sides, causing massive destruction and forcing entire populations to flee their homes and go hungry. Entire populations would be uprooted, starved, and in a state of crisis as a result of the extensive destruction it would cause. The region would descend into anarchy, with political and economic repercussions felt all over South Asia. Nuclear escalation poses a far greater threat, with catastrophic consequences for nearby nations such as China and nations across Southeast Asia. Because of China's regional influence, the crisis would have far-reaching economic and geopolitical ramifications for the country.

This is why the situation must be handled with utmost care. UN Secretary-General António Guterres states, “War is not the solution. War is the problem.” Aggression from any side fuels more hatred and division between the countries and leads to greater instability in the region. Instead of escalating tensions, dialogue and diplomacy must be prioritized. The two nations must come to the negotiating table, with the help of international mediators. This is where global institutions—like the United Nations and the World Bank—have a crucial role to play in these discussions. ASEAN should also offer support, as the consequences of this conflict would inevitably affect the entire South Asian and Southeast Asian regions.

Ultimately, the priority must be finding a peaceful, sustainable solution to the water dispute. Compensation mechanisms, water-sharing agreements, and long-term negotiations are essential to ensuring that both countries can benefit from the region's resources without resorting to violence. The fate of millions of people depends on how this issue is addressed now. The time for action is urgent, and only through cooperation and dialogue can we avoid the devastating consequences of war.

Conclusion

A catastrophic change has occurred in the security situation in South Asia with the suspension of the IWT due to rising geopolitical tensions. The treaty, once celebrated as an exceptional instance of effective trans-boundary water cooperation among nuclear-armed neighbors, is now on the brink of collapse. This puts at risk not just the bilateral relations between Pakistan and India, but also the lives of millions of people who depend on the Indus River system for food production, energy production, and basic necessities. Water, if turned into a weapon, has the potential to spark a humanitarian disaster, leading to a regional conflict with catastrophic ecological, economic, and

^{iv} NHPC known as “National Hydroelectric Power Corporation” Limited was incorporated on November 7, 1975. NHPC is a MINI RATNA Category-I Enterprise of the Government of India.

even nuclear repercussions. Both sides' communities' survival and dignity are at stake in this dilemma, which goes beyond geographical conflicts or river control.

Courage, diplomacy, and forward-thinking leadership are necessary for the future. It is imperative that India and Pakistan refrain from using threats or unilateral suspensions and instead return to the negotiating table with renewed commitment to dialogue, equity, and the long-term viability of the agreement. Updates to the IWT are necessary so that it can address the issues of today, including rising global temperatures, increasing population demands, and new technological developments. To depoliticize water and establish peace via mutual dependence, it is necessary to engage impartial international mediators, establish cooperative crisis procedures, and prioritize people-to-people diplomacy. In order to ensure that rivers do not become weapons of war but rather tools of peace, resilience, and shared prosperity, the region must work together to control its water resources.

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