Hydropolitical Tensions: The Indus Waters Treaty and Transboundary Water Conflicts in South Asia Post-1947

DR HRISHIKESH M BEVANUR
Ph.D. Associate Professor, Dept. Of Political Science, Maharani Cluster University, Bangalore-560001

Abstract—**The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 transformed the Indus River Basin from a unified irrigation network into a contested transboundary resource. The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), signed in 1960, has served as the primary legal mechanism for water sharing between India and Pakistan. While it has survived multiple wars, the treaty is currently facing unprecedented strain due to technical disputes, "water nationalism," and the ecological impacts of climate change. This paper analyzes the evolution of these conflicts, from the immediate post-partition crises to the modern legal battles over projects like Kishanganga and Ratle. By synthesizing hydrological data and legal precedents, the study argues for a transition toward an integrated basin management approach to ensure regional stability.**

Keywords— **Indus Waters Treaty, Hydropolitics, South Asian Security, Transboundary Water, Climate Change, Kishanganga Dispute.**

I. INTRODUCTION: THE 1947 GEOPOLITICAL SCHISM

The 1947 partition was not merely a political division but a hydrological disruption. The "Radcliffe Line" bisected the Indus Basin—the world's largest contiguous irrigation system—leaving the headworks in India (the upper riparian) and the vast command area in Pakistan (the lower riparian). This geographic reality immediately politicized water, turning the lifelines of the Punjab and Sindh into strategic assets.

II. THE 1948 CRISIS AND THE INTER-DOMINION ACCORD

The first major conflict occurred on April 1, 1948, the day after the "Standstill Agreement" expired. India, asserting its sovereign right as the upper riparian, stopped the flow of water into the Dipalpur Canal and the main branches of the Upper Bari Doab Canal. This action, though brief, created an existential panic in Pakistan and led to the "Inter-Dominion Accord" of May 4, 1948. While the accord restored flow, it also established India's claim to the proprietary rights of the Eastern rivers, a contention Pakistan vehemently opposed, setting the stage for eight years of World Bank-led negotiations.

III. THE STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK OF THE INDUS WATERS TREATY (1960)

The IWT remains unique in international law because it partitioned the rivers themselves rather than the water within them. This "mathematical division" was intended to minimize the need for joint management, which was deemed impossible given the bilateral mistrust.

3.1 Allocation of Resources

The treaty divided the six rivers into two groups. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the average annual flow (approx. 168 MAF total).

Table 1: Distribution of Rivers under the Indus Waters Treaty

River	Category	Approx. Annual Flow (MAF)	Allotted To	India's Treaty Rights
Indus	Western	~90	Pakistan	Limited (RoR, Domestic)
Jhelum	Western	~23	Pakistan	Limited (RoR, Domestic)
Chenab	Western	~26	Pakistan	Limited (RoR, Domestic)

River	Category	Approx. Annual Flow (MAF)	Allotted To	India's Treaty Rights
Ravi	Eastern	~6.5	India	Unrestricted
Beas	Eastern	~12.5	India	Unrestricted
Sutlej	Eastern	~14	India	Unrestricted

Note: MAF = Million Acre Feet. "RoR" refers to Run-of-the-River hydroelectric projects.

IV. THE STORAGE PARADOX AND TECHNICAL DISPUTES

While the Eastern rivers belong exclusively to India, the Treaty permits India "limited use" of the Western rivers for domestic, agricultural, and non-consumptive purposes (hydroelectricity). However, the specific design criteria for these projects have become the primary source of conflict.

Table 2: India's Permissible Storage on Western Rivers (Annexure E)

River	General Storage (MAF)	Power Storage (MAF)	Flood Storage (MAF)	Total Permissible (MAF)
Indus	0.25	0.15	-	0.40
Jhelum	0.50	0.75	0.25	1.50
Chenab	0.50	0.60	0.60	1.70
Total	1.25	1.50	0.85	3.60

Pakistan's central fear is that Indian infrastructure (even without storage) could allow for "flow regulation." If India builds enough run-of-the-river plants with gate-controlled spillways, Pakistan argues that India could technically "hold" water during critical sowing seasons or "release" it to cause artificial flooding.

V. CONTEMPORARY CASE STUDIES: KISHANGANGA AND RATLE

The Kishanganga (330 MW) and Ratle (850 MW) projects represent the "new age" of IWT disputes.

- Kishanganga (2013 PCA Ruling): The Court of Arbitration upheld India's right to divert water from the Kishanganga to the Jhelum for power generation but introduced the concept of "Environmental Flows" (E-Flows), mandating India maintain a minimum flow of 9 cumecs to protect the downstream ecology.
- The 2023 Stalemate: Following decades of disagreement, Pakistan requested a Court of Arbitration (CoA), while India requested a Neutral Expert. The World Bank's decision to allow both processes to proceed simultaneously has created a "legal dualism" that threatens the treaty’s arbitration mechanism.

VI. ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES: THE CRYOSPHERE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The IWT was negotiated in a "stationary" climate era. Today, the Indus Basin is one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world.

1. Glacial Retreat: The Himalayas are the "Water Tower of Asia." Increased melting rates are causing initial discharge surges (leading to floods like Pakistan 2022) followed by a projected long-term decline in base flow.

2. Monsoon Variability: Shifts in rainfall patterns make the 1960 fixed-volume allocations increasingly obsolete.
3. Groundwater Depletion: The treaty does not govern the transboundary aquifers that are being rapidly depleted on both sides of the border.

VII. THE RISE OF "WATER NATIONALISM"

Post-2016 (Uri) and 2019 (Pulwama), India's stance shifted. The government announced plans to utilize its "full share" of the Eastern rivers (e.g., the Shahpurkandi Dam and Ujh Multipurpose Project) and hinted at renegotiating the treaty under Article XII(3). This "Water Nationalism" views the treaty not just as a technical document but as a tool for strategic leverage.

VIII.CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Indus Waters Treaty is a Cold War-era document attempting to manage 21st-century environmental and political crises. To remain relevant, it must evolve.

- Data Transparency: Implementing real-time satellite telemetry to share flow data can reduce the "trust deficit."
- Joint Climate Research: Both nations must collaborate on studying the "Peak Water" phenomenon in the Himalayas.
- Beyond Bilateralism: Future management should ideally involve Afghanistan and China to create a basin-wide ecosystem approach.

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