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Climate Change and Hydro-politics in South Asia: A Critical Analysis of the Indus Waters Treaty

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Abstract
The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) signed between India and Pakistan in 1960 has been cited as a model of transboundary water agreement even in a situation where the political relationship has been frosty since then. Yet, the 21st century puts the full strain on this treaty as geopolitical tensions and unequal powers spread along with the increasing consequences of climate change. This paper critically analyzes the nexus between water security and interstate competition in South Asia regarding the resilience and relevance of the IWT in managing changing hydrological realities and the increasing national security concerns. With the use of hydro politics and securitization theory, this study examines how the lack of water created by climatic changes is becoming politicized and securitized in the India-Pakistan relationship. It explores the possibility of the trend of unilateral water infrastructure development, suspension of treaties, and cross-border finger-pointing that manifests itself in the light of terrorism, reflecting a shift in cooperative relations to a coercive one.

Key Words

Climate Change Hydro-politics South Asia

Introduction

The problem of water security has become one of the most acute issues of the 21st century due to which more and more interstate tensions, regional instability, and conflicts arise (Gleick 1993 & 1999; Wolf, Yoffe, & Giordano 2003). Climate change is also increasing at a faster rate and thereby changing rain patterns, reducing fresh water resources and also increasing the conflict over shared river basins

(Sadoff & Grey 2002; UNEP 2016). Environmentally, rivers such as the Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, Mekong, and Jordan have become geopolitical hotspots as many tries to figure out how to manage the waters to both develop his/her nation and cooperate in the management of rivers through the common good (Wolf et al. 2003). Power imbalances, nationalistic policies, and the lack of strong enforcement have, in most instances, made previous cooperative arrangements a source of coercion and of strategic competition. As an example, the controversial building of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in Ethiopia has been highly opposed by downstream Egypt, and the increased dominance of China over the Mekong River has been highly viewed with alarm in Southeast Asia (Barry & Whitaker 2025; Badri 2025). These instances indicate a new tendency in the world when water becomes not only a natural resource, but also a strategic one that has direct links to national security (Zawahri 2009).

The same trend does not exclude South Asia. There has been a delicate point of cooperation and confrontation occupied by water since times immemorial in the hot and cold relationship between India and Pakistan whose relationship is infested with historic hostility, territorial disputes and regular cross-border hostilities. Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) between the two nuclear armed countries brokered by the World Bank in 1960 has traditionally been treated as a rare example of successful diplomacy between nuclear armed adversaries. It reserves access to the six rivers in the Indus basin where the completion gives the Eastern rivers to India, Western rivers to Pakistan and creates a mechanism on dispute resolution (World Bank 1960; Mantoo 2020). Many wars and political crises have not stopped the IWT more than 60 years of existence.

Nevertheless, over the past few years, the strength of the IWT has become greatly challenged. The upstream dams that India is building (Kishanganga, Baglihar) have brought back the existence of water as a weapon of statecraft (Ahmed 2020; Hill 2017). Events took a turn to the worse in April 2025 after a terrorist attack in Indian administered Kashmir, India declare the suspension of the IWT as response directing it towards blaming Pakistan (India Today 2025; Economic Times 2025). This step has led water diplomacy towards a security-based system where the Indus

basin has turned out to be a location of cooperated agreement into a possible zone of termination.

In this backdrop, the present paper critically looks at the changing nature of water security and interstate rivalry in South Asia, by revolving around the IWT. It examines the role of climate change, hydro-political asymmetries of power and securitization of water resources in transforming India-Pakistan water politics. By putting the scenario of Indus in a bigger global perspective, this paper will evaluate how the IWT can evolve to new environmental and political environment, where water has become more of a political and security and weaponization concern. The issue of water security is no more restricted as a form of environmental or developmental issue, rather it has become a part of the geopolitics of regions, which are facing problems of extreme scarcity of resources, international tensions, as well as being subject to climate vulnerability. The given research can be considered important in a number of ways, academic and policy-related.

The study contributes to the literature of hydro-political studies the focus of which is in the power asymmetries, securitization, and strategic actions in international, or bilateral, water relations. The analysis of the concept of hydro-politics theory, and the securitization theory in the light of the study presents a multi-dimensional analytical tool that evaluates the situation where water is being viewed as an instrument of sanction and force in bilateral relationships with increasing prominence.

2. Theoretical Underpinning

2.1 Theory of hydro-politics (hegemony of water)

Hydro-politics has become a dominant approach to the transboundary water politics especially in those basins with conflict tendencies such as the Nile, Jordan, Mekong, and Indus (Zeitoun & Warner 2006). The theory of hydro-politics investigates how dilemma of water shortage, climate change and construction projects would shape states' decisions, actions and their relationships. Proponents of the hydro-hegemony concept contend that control over water resources is exerted by a dominant riparian state, leveraging its upstream geographical position, economic power, or diplomatic

influence. It further argues that hegemonic design by upstream and downstream riparian usually dictates the outcome of treaties. This theory has placed water as a strategic asset because of its scarcity and rising demand. Water has become a national security concern and extraordinary measures are taken to securitize it (Elhance 1999). The theory highlights the ability to access and to control water resources directly relates to other power structures among the riparian (river sharing) states.

Hydro-politics theory stresses on the strategic positions of the states, in order to deal with the access, use, control and distribution of water across states. The proponents argue about top-stream and bottom-stream dynamics in which the states that are geographically above over the other states, enjoyed more strategic advantages and are in a dominant position. A dominant state can control water flow either through soft or hard means. Thus, the reasons behind controlling are water scarcity and climate change, transform a cooperative engagement to competition or interstate rivalry.

India is an upper riparian (upstream) with dominant posture in the region. Although, IWT agreement is among the most successful agreements in the world but it is now accused of being outdated and unequal according to the hydro-political perspective. Pakistan views are that India, with the construction of dams (Baglihar, Kishanganga), is infringing the treaty and hydro-nationalism is on the increase (Zawahri 2009). Other scholars internationally such as Zeitoun, Warner as well as Mirumachi have relied on the Indus basin to demonstrate how it is a prime example of what they term as hegemonic cooperation, that is, cooperation molded in the context of power rather than equality. Previously water was a source of cooperation but in the recent times it is creating geopolitical tensions because of climate change and a rising demand of it.

2.2. Securitization theory

The Copenhagen School gained prominence in the 1990s by enlarging the conception of security to non-military threats. Arguably the most prominent contribution of the Copenhagen School is the theory of ‘securitization’, which explains how non-military issues such as economic, environmental, societal and

political elements can be considered as matters of security (Buzan 1991: 433; 1998; Wæver 1995). Securitization is the process through which 'an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus, by labelling it as security agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means' (Buzan et al. 1998: 26).

The securitization process has three units of analysis: i) the securitizing actor (elites or officials); ii) the referent object that requires attention; iii) the audience which is the target of the securitization narrative (Buzan et al. 1998: 37-38). The problems are labelled as threats through the act of speech by actors (Wæver, 1995: 55) thereby, legitimizing the use of extraordinary measures and immediate attention and prioritization of resource allocation (Buzan et al. 1998; Wæver 1995). This existential threat is then used as an attempt to authorize exceptional measures and their successful acceptance by the target audience (Wilkinson 2015: 33). The theory of securitization broadens the definition of security going from micro to macro by incorporating the social aspects of security and how people or societies construct or securitize threats. For instance, in the post 9/11, the issues of underdevelopment, poverty became priority security agenda in developing and fragile states (Shakirullah et al. 2020).

3. Research Methodology

The data for this research study was collected through a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is a descriptive/ interpretive approach providing a thorough interpretation of social phenomenon. Qualitative research is inductive in approach which involves the analysis of contested thematic issues and empowers researchers to reach a truer understanding of social issues. The qualitative research design is best suited because the undertaken research is not only exploratory but also interpretative in its focus to comprehend the conjunction of climate, hydro-politics, and security dynamics with reference to the Indus Waters Treaty. The single-case study investigating the context of water conflict between India and Pakistan enables closer inspection of the contextual parameters of challenging issues concerning water security in South Asia.

Secondary data collected for this study includes the literature on the formal text of treaties (e.g., Indus Waters Treaty), government records, policy documents, UN records, and legislation to get to know the legal and historical scenario. Articles in the media, political speeches and diplomatic efforts by India and Pakistan are analyzed to reveal the politics that are framing water and the politics behind terrorism. From the academic literature, expert opinion, and think tanks in the regions, similar reoccurring themes are identified involving water securitization, climate change and conflict escalation. A thematic analysis approach was adopted for data analysis. Thematic analysis is a broad term that explains a common data analytic process for qualitative or interpretive research. This research study thematic analysis includes: reviewing the data collected from various sources, assigning meaning (coding), classifying data into basic themes, searching for developing patterns, assessing the applicability of findings to the questions posed in the study, and ultimately writing up the findings and interpretations.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Historical context of Indus Water Treaty

The conflict over water between India and Pakistan began immediately after their independence in 1947. Before the partition, the water resources were mutually and collectively used in all over the Indian subcontinent. The colonial powers failed to understand the politics of hydro-hegemony during the boundary demarcation. The first water crisis between India and Pakistan initiated in April 1948 when India stopped the water flow from upper Bari Doab Canal that flows towards Lahore and Dipalpur. The disruption of water supply caused immediate panic and significant damage to Pakistan's irrigation infrastructure especially in Punjab. Pakistan viewed it as an act of aggression and accused India of being trying to dismantle Pakistan’s economy and survival. Initially, an Inter-Dominion agreement was signed in May 1948 which ensures the return of water flow towards Pakistan but it didn’t last long and remained unable to resolve the conflict.

Between 1948 and 1951, the bilateral talks between India and Pakistan failed due to incompatible interests and perceptions. Both states weren't ready to agree on a mutually beneficial and understood resolution. India justified its approach of building dams inside its territorial boundaries through Harmon doctrine which legitimized states of performing actions for the development and energy projects within their own national borders. Pakistan stressed over the transboundary nature of water and cited international customary law which ensuring the continuation of shared natural resources. In 1951, World Bank adopted a mediatory role to resolve the longstanding water crisis between India and Pakistan. Following extensive negotiations in seven rounds for over the period of nine years, the World Bank helped India and Pakistan sign the Indus Waters Treaty on September 19, 1960 (Gleick 1993 & 1999; World Bank 1960; Mantoo 2020).

Before the signing of treaty, India and Pakistan had engaged in disputes over the suspension of canal waters towards Pakistan by India in 1948. This signified the need for the presence of legal and cooperative body between both states to avoid further disagreements (Hill 2017; Zawahiri 2009). Under the domain of treaty, India had given the control of three eastern rivers, Ravi, Sutlej and Beas. Pakistan received three western rivers that are Indus, Chenab and Jhelum. The treaty also permitted India to use western waters in certain limitations under strong surveillance.

The Permanent Indus Commission was created to enhance cooperation, conflict resolution and exchange of information (Wolf, Yoffe & Giordano 2003). During the major wars between India and Pakistan (1965, 1971 and 1999) this treaty had survived and becoming a most durable water management framework in the world. There were some legal disputes under the auspices of IWT despite its durability and consistency. Pakistan had disagreement over Baglihar dam constructed over Chenab River. Pakistan requested to neutral third party in 2005 but the favors were on Indian sides. Another issue was of Kishanganga Hydroelectric Project. Pakistan petitioned arbitration at International Court of Arbitration in 2010 but the result was same, backing the development projects under some limitations. (Zawahri 2009; Ahmed 2020). Pakistan is concerned over these projects because these would restrict the flow of water towards its territory.

4.2. Climate Change as a Conflict multiplier in South Asia

Climate change has overwhelmingly aggravated the long-standing water dispute between India and Pakistan, primarily by disturbing the natural hydrology of the Indus River system, which is the lifeblood for both nations. The hydrological flow of the Indus Basin has been significantly destabilized by the climate change effect, increased glacial melt, modified river patterns, as well as increased effects of droughts and floods. As the glaciers melted, this initially increased water flow, more recently with global warming these vital ice reserves diminish. This impending scarcity intensifies the competition for a decreasing resource, especially for Pakistan, which is profoundly reliant on the Indus for its agricultural sector and hydropower generation. Both India and Pakistan are suffering with more frequent and intense floods, which ruin crops, displace local population, and destroy infrastructure, followed by protracted droughts that dwindle agricultural output and deplete underground water reserves. These erratic shifts threaten food and water security, putting enormous pressure on already vulnerable populations. For example, the 2022 floods in Pakistan, witnessed how climate change triggered extensive humanitarian crises and financial losses further straining the limited resources.

Such changes in the environment are not just ecological problems, but they intensify notions of dearth, increase upstream management dependency and cynicism amongst the riparian states (Ahmed 2020). Significantly, these climate-induced changes are putting enormous pressure on the 1960's IWT which has governed the sharing of the Indus's waters so far. Such a delicate situation places any perceived decline in water supply as a threat to the national existence on the part of Pakistan and the creation of infrastructure a sovereign right of India, which itself concerned with water security issues. Due to scarcity of water resources due to climate change, challenges the treaty's foundational assumptions, with India advocating for modifications to account for the new climate realities, while Pakistan remains concern of any unilateral changes that could jeopardize its water security. The IWT has not developed to deal with these climate-related stressors and the blame or rigidity of the IWT to deal with new challenges especially the variability in seasonal flow and collaborative basin-wide adaptation plans (Sahni 2006). The consequent

breakdown in data sharing and communication between India and Pakistan, which the treaty mandates only deepens distrust, transforming a critical shared resource into a possible climax for renewed conflict between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

The recent terrorist attacks especially have made points of inflection in water diplomacy of South Asia. After the Uri attack (2016), and, most recently, 2025 attack in Kashmir, India has threatened or gone ahead to re-examine or withdraw some parts of the IWT purportedly under the pretext of retaliation in the interest of national security. It appears that the recent turn of events has put tremendous pressure on the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) between India and Pakistan mainly over the increasing tension that followed a terrorist attack.

On 22 April 2025, 26 people, predominantly innocent tourists were killed in a terrorist attack in Pahalgam in the Indian-administered Kashmir. India blamed Pakistani based militant groups for the Pahalgam attack in Kashmir (India Today 2025). Following this attack, India adopted a harsher policy by suspension of IWT from its side (Chaganti Singh et al. 2025). This is the first time in the IWT's history that a party to treaty unilaterally suspends its participation. India constructed water as a national security issue rather than a shared natural resource to meet the needs of the country's survival. Indian government asserted that Pakistan allegedly supports cross border terrorism and threatened the national security of India. Pakistan is violating the objectives upon which the treaty was built and it couldn't uphold peaceful cooperation frameworks (India Today 2025).

During the earlier wars between India and Pakistan, the IWT remained intact but following the Pahalgam attack, India made a clear departure from its previous policies and act aggressively. India is triggered towards Pakistan after the Pahalgam attack. India also asserted that it didn't violate the IWT and its actions are as a response to Pakistan's terrorist activities and for the national security of Indian territory (Economic Times 2025; Badri 2025). Operation Sindoor launched by India towards Pakistani territory was also a part of broader retaliatory response against Pakistan's violation of Indian sovereignty and national security. India justified it as a post Pahalgam attack retaliatory response and as a right to defend itself. Retaliating in response, India spoke publicly about suspending the Indus Waters Treaty on April

23, 2025, blaming such cross-border terrorism perpetrated by Pakistan. It was a drastic change as far as bilateral relations between India and Pakistan were concerned.

Pakistan denounced the suspension of IWT, declaring it an act of war and also denied of any involvement in the Pahalgam attack (Dawn 2025). Pakistani officials stated that the Indian accusations were baseless, false, and illogical without any proof or evidence of Pakistan's involvement. Pakistan asked the international community to investigate the incident and bring any evidence against Pakistan's involvement in Pahalgam attack. But before this could happen, India launched Operation Sindoor. This operation targeted many civilians and strategic sites in Pakistan resulting in many casualties. In response to this, Pakistan launched Operation Bunyan ul Marsoos in retaliation to Indian aggression (Inter-Services Public Relations [ISPR] 2025). Before any further escalation, President Trump of the United States brokered a ceasefire agreement between both the states.

4.3. The Securitization of Water as a National Security

The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), which was at first seen as an impartial method to regulate the shared water uses, has become a game of geopolitical fitting and falling by the politicization of the dispute along the Indus River Basin. This makes what can only be called securitization of water has restructured the nature and conditions of the conflict system of the Indus River itself. The securitization of water has become existential threat, increasing demand of water for agricultural activities, industrial complexes and energy projects. Pakistan's economy and the livelihoods of overwhelming majority of its population are closely linked to the waters of the Indus River system, particularly for agricultural purposes. The Indus river system is a huge network of canals, dams and barrages, recognized as one of the major irrigation systems in the world, running over 1.6 million kilometers of channels and streams.

This network of channels irrigates around 80% of Pakistan's cultivated land and contributes for around 90% of the state's food production, directly contributing about 25% to its GDP. Moreover, it is a source of employment for a vast majority of its population. Pakistan's major crops such rice; cotton wheat and sugarcane are

heavily dependent on the continuous and adequate supply of Indus waters. Without Indus waters supply, a large agricultural land would be unproductive, rendering the country vulnerable to prevalent food shortages and financial instability. This vast dependence on Indus waters underscores why any change or threat to the Indus water flows, whether from climate change or infrastructure developments, signifies an existential and hydro-strategic anxiety for Pakistan.

In the recent times, IWT is highly securitized, politicized and weaponized by the Indian state and justified by cross border terrorism and national security context. After the Uri attack in September 2016, Indian Prime Minister stated that water and blood can't flow together (Hill 2017). This statement showed their intentions of leveraging water against Pakistan. Following the Pulwama attack in 2019, India increased its work force for the construction of dams over Jammu and Kashmir. In 2022, Pakistan solicited World Bank over the Indian intentions and their actions but there wasn't any support towards Pakistan (Sahni 2006). The securitization of water has led to a complete restructuring of how conflicts over the Indus River are waged and understood, changing both their character and underlying conditions.

Water is becoming a sovereignty and survival issue to both the countries. India has escalated the claim of its hydro-sovereignty due to its increased technical means to construct dam infrastructure on the western rivers, whereas Pakistan perceives such moves as life or death (Badri 2025; Dawn 2025). Securitization of water discourse has brought tough policy stands, that is, less scope of negotiation and diminishing confidence building measures. On securitization line of thought, the political elite in the two states have managed to weaponize water into an existential threat, which has given them auspicious to take extraordinary actions such as temporarily suspending the treaty and expansion of infrastructure unilaterally (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde 1998). This has also limited diplomacy, which has strengthened such a conflict-prone situation instead of making it easier to have sustainable water cooperation. IWT has demonstrated exceptional resilience since more than six decades even in the course of war.

Nonetheless its institutional process like the Permanent Indus Commission is considered more or less effective in the handling of current conflicts. The treaty

lacks measures to prepare to climate change as well as terrorist contingencies and fails to build any trust in the hybrid threat situation, which makes the treaty even more perceived outdated and lacking (Badri 2025; Barry & Whitaker 2025). In addition, the binary division of rivers assigned to either India (east is east) or to Pakistan (west is west) fails to encourage collaborative basin-wide management thereby facilitating the parallelism and a frequent opposition of development agendas (Economic Times 2025). The lack of an enforcement tool also restricts its use in situations one of the sides wants or chooses to politicize or mothball.

4.4. Hydro-politics and its implications

The hydro-politics between both countries are chiefly centered on the Indus River system. Pakistan's, agricultural livelihood and associated economy is heavily dependent on the Indus waters, views any Indian infrastructure development as deviation from the treaty as a direct threat to its food and water security. However, on the other hand India, stresses on its rights to utilize its share for irrigation and hydropower generation to meet its own growing population's demands, often negating Pakistan claim as an exaggerated and baseless. The IWT is generally considered one of the most successful international water-sharing treaties, having survived wars. Its annulment would signal a breakdown of trust and a readiness to weaponise a vital natural resource, transforming water from a shared necessity into a tool of coercion. This would radically escalate tensions, crafting an environment ripe for miscalculation and possibly leading to military confrontation, with overwhelming consequences for both states and the broader region.

The regional consequences of this hydro-political tension are severe. This issue works a constant irritant in already fragile situation, hindering any cooperation efforts in terms of trade and regional security. It would set a precedent for transboundary water management globally, especially for India itself. India is a downstream riparian to China on the Brahmaputra River. If India one-sidedly revokes the IWT, it would lose any moral or legal ground to object if China in the

same manner restrict or divert the Brahmaputra's waters, which are vigorous for India's northeastern states. This type of situation could prompt a domino effect, leading to increased water conflicts across Asia, undermining international water laws and cooperative mechanism. This interconnectedness underlines that effective water diplomacy and supportive frameworks, rather than unilateral actions, are vital for maintaining regional and global stability in an era of climate-induced water stress.

The effectiveness of the IWT has been suspended and this has brought about the concern of stability in the region given that the two nations have nuclear powers (Al Jazeera English 2025). The world community is concerned that water resources have been politicized and may result conflict in the future (UNEP 2025). The way in which India has suspended the treaty highlights the importance of the status that water resources can gain as ladder in a geopolitical war (India Today 2025). There are several other examples globally as well. For instance, on the Blue Nile, Ethiopia (which is upstream) is constructing a huge dam. Egypt (downstream) is worried that this will deprive it of the much-needed water (African Affairs Council 2025). Threat of military actions and unfavorable (high-stakes) diplomacy has been part of the tensions. Egypt has always been a power state, and Ethiopia is on the rise (Zeitoun & Warner 2006; Gleick 1993 & 1999). The states are doing what is in their best interest with a lot of suspicion. Similarly, the upstream power China has constructed dams that influence flows of the downstream (Mekong River Commission 2025). Vietnam and Cambodia are afraid of disasters of ecology and food security. One of the most famous instances of transboundary water governance is the Mekong that is frequently presented as a hydro-hegemony of China (Zeitoun 2008).

It can be said that the politicization of the IWT has resulted in a metamorphosis of the cooperation under the water into a statecraft battlefield (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde 1998). Whereas traditionally, the treaty has been considered an example of successful transboundary cooperation, there have been an increased number of those considering it within strategic and military undertakings (Council on Foreign Relations 2025). This change has reduced the room of technical solutions and has enlarged the strategic fault lines between two countries. Decay of trust, further worsened by political nationalism, climate fears and violence across borders,

implies that water diplomacy can no longer be isolated as part of the broader pattern of conflict. Instead, it is now integrated to it (Economic Times 2025).

This is a radical change of co-operation to coercion and here we see that previously water was a problem that was neuteral and non-political but now it is being weaponized and securitized. The price frame of the IWT when it is referred to as a concession, not a legal requirement, further propagates the zero-sum mentality, and prevents the culture of shared governance and helps further the cycle of animosity.

5. Conclusion

Given all these, strong cooperative systems, strategic suspicions and water war danger in South Asia have been augmented by titling the Indus Waters Treaty as a political tool due to climate volatility, securitization reputation to terrorism and institutionalized national security interests. The IWT that was initially a good precedent of peaceful water-sharing is now entangled in a greater grid of geopolitical rivalry. In the absence of institutional transformation, confidence building and cooperation that is climate-sensitive, water in the Indus basin can stop being a barrier to its leakage into conflict, but rather become a catalyst to future violence. The study establishes that, though the Indus Waters Treaty has been able to hold up against the historical strain, it is facing the brunt of contemporary geopolitical and environmental pressures. It is through its politicization accompanied by climate-induced scarcity of water and securitization of the discourse around water that India and Pakistan are edging towards water war syndrome instead of cooperation.

Unless the treaty is reformed, is engaged inter-laterally, and enjoys climate-sensitive planning, it is likely to be missed out or fail to meet the challenges of this 21st century world. India and Pakistan are in a tragic turning point. Although the Indus Waters Treaty has in the past fended off war on water; its exposure to extreme politics and climatic effects has become a major threat to peace and human development in the region. A combination of security-sensitive measures together with the development-oriented collaboration should help the two states transform the Indus River to an instrument of peace building in South Asia.

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