

Indus Waters Treaty Hidden Tensions, Flowing Rivers

Kandi Kamala

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ABSTRACT

The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), signed in 1960 between India and Pakistan under the auspices of the World Bank, has long been hailed as a landmark agreement in Transboundary water management. Despite its success in facilitating the equitable distribution of the Indus River system's waters, the treaty has not been without tensions. This paper explores the underlying political, environmental, and geopolitical strains that challenge the stability of the IWT. It delves into historical grievances, regional power dynamics, and evolving climate pressures that have heightened concerns over water security for both nations. Additionally, the study examines how infrastructural developments, such as dam constructions and hydropower projects, exacerbate mistrust, contributing to the fragile state of the treaty. While the Indus Rivers continue to flow, the hidden tensions risk destabilizing regional cooperation and threaten long-term water sustainability in South Asia. The analysis underscores the need for adaptive policy frameworks, enhanced diplomatic engagement, and comprehensive environmental assessments to preserve the integrity of the Indus Waters Treaty in an era of growing resource scarcity and geopolitical uncertainty.

KEYWORDS

• Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) • India-Pakistan Relations • Water-Sharing Disputes
• Hydro Politics • River Diplomacy • Kashmir and Water Conflict • Geopolitical Tensions • Water Security

AUTHOR'S AFFILIATION:

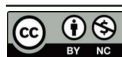
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Government Degree College for Women (Autonomous), Begumpet, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Kandi Kamala, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Government Degree College for Women (Autonomous), Begumpet, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

E-mail: kamala.ranu@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

The Indus River system, comprising the Indus and its five major tributaries the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej has for centuries been the lifeline of the north western Indian subcontinent. The fertile plains of Punjab and Sindh have depended on its waters for agriculture, livelihoods, and settlement patterns since ancient times. However, the partition of British India in 1947 disrupted this natural flow, transforming rivers into contested political resources. The newly created boundary between India and Pakistan not only divided land and people but also bifurcated the shared river system, sowing seeds of disputes over water rights and usage.

In the years immediately following partition, tensions over canal water allocations escalated, with both countries struggling to secure their agricultural needs. The situation reached a crisis in April 1948, when India temporarily halted the flow of waters from canals leading into Pakistan, compelling negotiations under international mediation. Recognizing the potential for prolonged conflict over such a vital resource, the World Bank intervened as a mediator, and after nearly a decade of dialogue, the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) was signed in 1960 between Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India and President Ayub Khan of Pakistan.

The Treaty provided a framework of unprecedented compromise: the three western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab) were allocated to Pakistan, while the three eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej) were given to India. In addition, mechanisms for dispute resolution, data sharing, and cooperative river management were established. At the time, the IWT was hailed as a model of successful trans boundary water-sharing and an instrument of peace in a turbulent region.

Yet beneath the surface of cooperation lay unresolved tensions. The competing needs of rapidly growing populations, increasing demands for irrigation and hydropower, and the deep-rooted mistrust between India and Pakistan have continuously tested the Treaty. Over six decades later, the Indus Waters Treaty stands not only as a symbol of fragile cooperation but also as a site of recurring contestation where rivers flow, but hidden

political, strategic, and environmental currents often run stronger.

The Indus River system, one of the three major river basins within the Himalayan drainage system, is a vital lifeline for the Indian subcontinent. The Indus River and its extensive network of tributaries support diverse ecosystems and human settlements, playing a crucial role in the cultural, agricultural, and economic landscape of the region. This article aims to study in detail the Indus River System, its origin, course, tributaries, and other related aspects.

About Indus River System

The Indus River system is one of the three major river basins that comprise the Himalayan drainage system. The Indus River System and its numerous tributaries flow through the western part of the Indian subcontinent, carving deep gorges and sustaining diverse ecosystems along its course. With a total length of over 3,000 kilometres, the Indus is the longest river in Pakistan and one of the longest in Asia.

Origin of Indus River

The Indus River originates from a glacier near Bokhar Chu in the Tibetan region in the Kailash Mountain range near the Mansarovar Lake. The river flows northwest and enters the Ladakh region of India at a place called Demchok. Once in India, the Indus River flows between the Karakoram and Ladakh ranges. In Tibet, it is known as 'Singi Khamban,' or the Lion's Mouth.

Course of Indus River

The Indus River is joined by the Zaskar River at Leh and then by the Shyok River. Just above Mithankot, the Indus River receives the combined waters of the five eastern tributaries the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Satluj from the Panchnad. In the Sindh Province, the river gathers significant sediment, forming the Indus River delta before draining into the Arabian Sea near Karachi. The blind Indus River Dolphin, a sub-species of dolphin, is found exclusively in the Indus River. The Indus flows through India only in the Leh district of the Union Territory of Ladakh.

Indus Water Treaty 1960

On November 30 1960, the Lok Sabha witnessed an extraordinary debate. The debate

was initiated by Congress MP Iqbal Singh from Punjab as Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru looked on. Within seconds, the exchange took a curious turn as several members from the ruling Congress party, who were present in the hall to debate the newly signed Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), began to criticise the Nehru government.

Most surprisingly, during the 150-minutes long discussion, the strongest criticism to the treaty came from the Congress MPs from Punjab and Rajasthan the two States that were part of the Indus-waters network. H.C. Mathur of the Congress took to the floor and gave out the bitterest criticism, saying the treaty would adversely affect Rajasthan. Iqbal Singh, who started the debate, argued that the treaty would affect food production in Indian Punjab. As Prime Minister Nehru waited for his chance to rise to the defence of the treaty that was signed by him and Gen. Ayub Khan of Pakistan on September 19, 1960, members termed the Indus Waters Treaty appeasement and surrender to Pakistan". Asoka Mehta of the Congress argued that the country had been betrayed by those who were supposed to defend its interests.

- The **Indus Water Treaty of 1960** is a landmark agreement between India and Pakistan, brokered by the **World Bank**, to manage the shared water resources of the Indus River system.
- The treaty allocated the use of **three eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej)** to India while granting Pakistan control over the three western rivers (**Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab**).
- This agreement has been hailed as one of the most successful water-sharing pacts in the world, providing a framework for cooperation and conflict resolution between the two nations despite their broader geopolitical tensions.
- It allows India certain non-consumptive uses and hydropower projects on the western rivers while ensuring downstream flow to Pakistan, thereby balancing the water needs and rights of both countries.

That's the question on many minds, after India suspended major treaty governing water sharing of six rivers in the Indus basin between the two countries, following Tuesday's horrific

attack in Indian-administered Kashmir. The 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) survived two wars between the nuclear rivals and was seen as an example of transboundary water management. The suspension is among several steps India has taken against Pakistan, accusing it of backing cross-border terrorism a charge Islamabad flatly denies. It has also hit back with reciprocal measures against Delhi, and said stopping water flow "will be considered as an Act of War". The treaty allocated the three eastern rivers the Ravi, Beas and Sutlej of the Indus basin to India, while 80% of the three western ones the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab to Pakistan. Disputes have flared in the past, with Pakistan objecting to some of India's hydropower and water infrastructure projects, arguing they would reduce river flows and violate the treaty. (More than 80% of Pakistan's agriculture and around a third of its hydropower depend on the Indus basin's water)

INDUS WATERS TREATY: CURRENT FLASHPOINTS & UNDERLYING TENSIONS

1. The Suspension and Legal Undercurrents

- In April 2025, triggered by the Pahalgam terror attack, **India unilaterally suspended the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT)**, citing national security concerns a move without legal provision under the treaty, which strictly lacks clauses for unilateral abrogation or suspension.
- During this period, India **halted flows from the Baglihar Dam (on the Chenab)** and conducted **off-season reservoir flushing** at Baglihar and Salal actions that Pakistan viewed as treaty violations.
- India is now exploring **legal paths to exit the treaty's dispute-resolution mechanisms**, including possibly notifying the Neutral Expert or seeking broader legal counsel under the Vienna Convention framework.

2. Hydropower Projects & Strategic Leverage

- India continues advancing major dam projects on western rivers: **Pakal Dul, Ratle, and Kishanganga** among them:
 - **Pakal Dul** (1,000 MW) is underway on the Chenab, with around **66% completion as of May 2025**, aimed for commissioning by 2026–2028.

- **Ratle Hydro Plant** (850 MW) is also in progress; India sees no treaty breach due to the design, while Pakistan objects.
- **Kishanganga** has already triggered arbitration; court rulings found the design permissible under the treaty, though Pakistan continues to contest its downstream impact.

3. Diplomatic Backlash & Escalating Rhetoric

- Pakistan has aggressively responded: **PM Shehbaz Sharif warned that any interference with water flow would provoke a “decisive response”**, and Army Chief Asim Munir even hinted at destroying Indian dams with missiles a highly alarming escalation.
- India, meanwhile, has intensified its rhetoric. PM Modi labeled the IWT unfair and declared “blood and water cannot flow together,” framing the treaty as unjust toward India.
- The **Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA)** recently ruled that India’s design for run-of-river hydro projects must comply with existing treaty provisions, but **India rejected the court’s jurisdiction** outright.

4. Broader Strategic and Environmental Stakes

- The IWT has long been hailed as a rare example of resource-based cooperation between India and Pakistan. Its suspension threatens agricultural stability in Pakistan, affecting 80% of its irrigated agriculture and a quarter of its GDP all reliant on Indus waters.
- Experts and think tanks warn that using water as a strategic tool through dams, manipulated releases, or withheld hydrological data could spark broader regional instability.

5. Can Mediation Offer Relief?

- International stakeholders, including **Chatham House**, suggest that **World Bank-mediated dialogue** may provide a crucial de-escalation pathway even as India insists on Pakistan ending cross-border militancy before reconsidering its suspension.

- Tensions surrounding the Indus Waters Treaty are now boiling over from water-sharing disagreements into geopolitical brinkmanship. With infrastructure development, legal contention, and provocative rhetoric all mounting, the Indus rivers have become both a lifeline and a flashpoint.

CHALLENGES OF THE INDUS WATERS TREATY (IWT)

1. Geopolitical Challenges

- **India-Pakistan relations:** Political mistrust and hostility make cooperative water-sharing difficult.
- **Security concerns:** Water infrastructure projects are often viewed through the lens of national security rather than co-operation.

2. Treaty Limitations

- **Outdated framework:** Signed in 1960, the Treaty does not account for modern issues like climate change, rising population, or new technologies.
- **Exclusion of other stakeholders:** Afghanistan and China, which also impact regional rivers, are not part of the Treaty.

3. Technical and Hydrological Issues

- **Hydropower disputes:** India’s construction of dams on western rivers (e.g., Kishanganga, Baglihar) sparks objections from Pakistan over flow alterations.
- **Sedimentation and river flow changes:** Natural changes in river systems challenge the fixed water allocation.

4. Climate Change and Environmental Stress

- **Glacial melt in the Himalayas:** Impacts long-term water availability.
- **Unpredictable monsoons:** Seasonal variation causes droughts or floods, straining the Treaty’s rigid structure.
- **Water quality issues:** Pollution and reduced flows threaten ecosystems and human health.

5. Population and Agricultural Demands

- **Growing water needs:** Rising populations in both countries increase

demand for irrigation, drinking water, and hydropower.

- **Agriculture dependency:** Both nations rely heavily on Indus Basin waters for food security, intensifying competition.

6. Institutional and Legal Challenges

- **Dispute resolution delays:** The Treaty's mechanisms (Neutral Expert, Court of Arbitration, World Bank involvement) are slow and politically influenced.
- **Rigid allocation:** No room for flexible sharing during water stress years.

7. Strategic Concerns

- **"Water as a weapon" rhetoric:** Statements about revoking or revisiting the Treaty raise fears of water being politicized.
- **Infrastructure races:** Competing dam-building leads to mistrust rather than cooperation.

The IWT remains a symbol of cooperation but faces *hidden* tensions in the form of climate stress, political mistrust, outdated provisions, and competing national interests, making its sustainability in the 21st century increasingly uncertain.

CONCLUSION

The Indus Waters Treaty, hailed as a model of water-sharing diplomacy since 1960, has withstood wars and hostilities between India and Pakistan, largely maintaining the uninterrupted flow of critical rivers. However, beneath its resilient surface lie growing tensions political mistrust, climate change, burgeoning water needs, and infrastructural ambitions that threaten to unsettle its delicate balance. As both nations face escalating demands for water amid shifting monsoon patterns and glacial melt, the treaty's rigid frameworks are increasingly strained. Moving forward, preserving the spirit of cooperation requires proactive dialogue, modernization of

dispute resolution mechanisms, and a broader regional conversation on integrated river basin management. Without these efforts, the hidden currents of contention may one day overflow the banks of diplomacy, transforming flowing rivers into flashpoints of conflict. The future of the Indus system, and peace itself, may depend on recognizing these tensions today and addressing them with foresight and flexibility.

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