

# Water diplomacy

Over the last 53 years, there have been around 40 water-related disputes worldwide that have resulted in acts of violence and more than 150 treaties have been signed to resolve such issues.

The Indus Waters Treaty is one such example. India has recently expressed its aggressive ambitions to do away with this treaty. There are serious questions on the equitable distribution of shared water resources worth 18.5 million acre-feet (MAF) between both countries.

Afghanistan is planning to install more than a dozen dams through funds worth more than \$7 billion with a cumulative storage capacity of around 5 MAF. This will trigger a 17 percent decrease in Pakistan's share in the Kabul River Basin.

The Pak-Afghan border is a 2,252 kilometre line drawn by virtue of an agreement reached in Kabul between the amir of Afghanistan and the British government of India, on November 12, 1893. At the time, this line settled the cross-border disputes between the signatory nations.

The Durand Line has divided the Pakhtun belt between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Pakistan, the border starts from Chaghey district – which is near Zahedan in Iran – and passes through Chaman, Toba Kakar and Quetta in Balochistan. The belt also includes the bordering areas of Fata. The region has a population of five million and has seven agencies – Bajaur in the north; Mohmand and Khyber in the centre; and Kurram, Orakzai, North Waziristan and South Waziristan on the southern side. In the extreme north lie the Samarbagh and Barawal tehsils of Lower Dir, while Chitral is also located on the same border. The total population of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is estimated to be 28 million and the growth rate is 3.56 percent. In Afghanistan, the border starts from Nimruz, Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul in the south, to Paktika, Khost, Paktia in the centre and finishes at Nangarhar and Kunar in the north.

There are approximately 14 million Pakhtuns in Afghanistan. The Pakhtun are 30 percent of the 14 million-strong population of Balochistan. This shows evidence that the Durand Line has divided a population of around 51 million who speak the same language and share a value system, religion and culture.

The Trans-Durand hydrology of the Hindu Kush range helps Pakhtuns carry out agri-business in the areas alongside the Pak-Afghan border. This is called the Kabul River Basin, comprising rivers Chitral, Kunar and Kabul. It is 700 km long, originates from the Sanglakh Range in the mountains of Hindu Kush and passes through Kabul and Jalalabad. Downstream, it has water resources worth 17 MAF when it enters Pakistan and 14.4 MAF, when it enters Afghanistan from Chitral. This means there are an additional 2.6 MAF of water resources that flow from these tributaries in Afghanistan.

The Kabul River Basin contributes 12 percent water to the overall water resources of Afghanistan. The Afghan government has built dams at Naghlu, Surobi and Darunta on Kabul River before the intersection at Nangarhar. In addition, three more projects of the same nature are under consideration in the upstream of Kunar River. Other shared water resources include rivers and torrents, such as Kurram, Kaltu, Tochi and Gomal, comprising around 18.5 MAF of shared water resources of both countries.

Environmental degradation and water-induced disputes are deeply connected to socio-economic, political and geo-strategic roots. There have been grave concerns about the Pak-Afghan tensions on water-related issues, coupled with the prevailing wars and tensions over the last 70 years. These disputes have resulted in economic losses worth trillions of dollars, dozens of casualties and the displacement of millions of people. The existing academia in this regard is still in its infancy and is too far behind to lead mature societies and address such issues. Transboundary disaster diplomacy is a less-addressed aspect in the Pak-Afghan context.

Attempts to abridge the water issue in the Kabul River Basin have taken

place since 2002. There have been a series of talks in this regard but a drop scene is still awaited in this story.

Besides diplomatic interventions, there is a pressing need to build confidence through humanitarian interventions, relieve the miseries induced by poverty, marginalisation and the exposure to militancy, operations, oppression and disasters. Education, trade, infrastructure and the financial institutions of Afghanistan are other avenues that need serious attention from the civilian, democratic governments.

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