

# Why India Must Refrain From a Water War With Pakistan

Muhammad Daim Fazil

“Water that belongs to India cannot be allowed to go to Pakistan” — so said [Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi](#) last year. And that was the point when the potential for a water war between India and Pakistan became a reality. The Pakistani response by Foreign Affairs Advisor Sartaj Aziz, who said that revocation of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) by India “can be taken as an [act of war](#),” furthered the narrative of a looming water war.

Pakistan and India have already had a minor water brawl, in 1948 when India (the upper riparian state) choked the water flow toward Pakistan. Partition bestowed India an advantage, as the headwaters were located in its territory, leaving Pakistan exposed to India’s physical capacity to cut off vital irrigation water. As a result, India kept limiting Pakistan’s share of water. Seeing the possibility of another conflict between the two neighbors, the international community plunged in to fix the Indo-Pak water crisis. With the help of the World Bank, both states eventually agreed to the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) in 1960.

The IWT enabled Pakistan and India to equally share and utilize water coming from the Himalayan Mountains. The treaty is exemplary since it has survived dozens of Indo-Pak military skirmishes, hostile political atmospheres, and diplomatic hiccups. What has gone so wrong that now India is flexing its muscles to terminate the treaty, or at least change it to increase Indian benefits? Is it mere electoral rhetoric ahead of the state elections in Indian Punjab that motivated Modi to threaten IWT by saying “The government will [do everything](#) to give enough water to our farmers”? Or is India truly ready to now exercise its burgeoning military might?

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Whatever the motives are, New Delhi must reconsider before waging water war on Pakistan.

## **The Road to Another (Water) War**

In the presence of nuclear weapons, advanced ballistic missile programs, and huge armies on both sides, a traditional war is highly unlikely between the two rivals. Instead, a water war is in the making, largely from India. Wullar Barrage, the Kishanganga Project, Baglihar Dam, and dozens of other small and medium hydroelectric and irrigation projects are a few examples of Indian projects that obstruct the Pakistani share of water.

Making things worse, a report released by the [Asian Development Bank](#) (ADB) stated that “Pakistan’s storage capacity is limited to a 30-day supply, well below the recommended 1,000 days for countries with a similar climate.” Pakistan’s indispensable reliance on Indus water leaves very few options for Pakistan should India restrict flows.

Currently, the dialogue process between the two neighbors is on hold. Permanent Indus Water Commissioner meetings usually end unproductively and Modi’s idea to review the IWT added fuel to fire. Pakistan could wait a bit longer to determine the extent of the water crisis but depleting water reservoirs, domestic energy woes, and growing agricultural needs may push Pakistan to take a hard line, which could eventually unleash water war.

## **Chinese Retaliation?**

After seven decades of friendship, Pakistan and China are cementing their bilateral engagements by the initiation of the China-Pakistan-Economic-Corridor (CPEC). China remains the most valuable investor and facilitator in overcoming Pakistan’s existing acute shortage of energy. CPEC not only includes many coal based power plants (e.g., Sahiwal, Engro Thar, Port Qasim etc.) but it also some hydropower projects like the [Suki Kinari and Karot](#) projects. These would be jeopardized if India were to interrupt water flows.

Last year, [China blocked a tributary](#) of the Brahmaputra River in Tibet, which sent shockwaves to India. Pakistani media perceived the blockage as deliberate Chinese pressure to ease mushrooming Indian pressure on Pakistan. China, though, asserted that the move was necessary to construct the long-planned [Lalho hydroelectric project](#) and that the construction would not interrupt water flow toward India. Still, many saw the move as a “soft” message that India should refrain from instigating water wrangles with Islamabad. This interpretation is largely buttressed by the timing: the initial work on the Lalho project started back in [2014](#), but the blockage came immediately after Modi’s water warnings to Pakistan. China’s [Zam Hydropower Station](#), which became operational in 2015 on the Brahmaputra River, also raised Indian eyebrows over the prospect of disrupting water supplies.

Starting from Tibet, the Brahmaputra River flows into Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and later into Bangladesh. With control of the Tibetan headwaters, China could block the water flow at any time. Unlike Pakistan and India, there is no water treaty between China and India; however, both established an Expert Level Mechanism (ELM) in 2013 by which Beijing would provide India with data on water flows. Indian utilization of a water blockade against Pakistan could thus invite China to retaliate in kind, making things worse for the entire region.

## **Regional Peace at Stake**

As stated earlier, the IWT has been exemplary over the decades for its ability to withstand ebbs and flows in the bilateral relationship. Revoking the treaty may endanger regional security. The Indus water system, which originates from China and subsequently flows to India and Pakistan, could generate a three party crisis with a bigger threat of large-scale war.

Moreover, Indian revocation of the IWT could also send a negative message to neighboring countries. For instance, around seven rivers, including the Kabul River, flow from Afghanistan to Pakistan. The [Kabul](#), [Kurram](#), and [Gomalis](#) Rivers are the main irrigation source for more than 150,000 acres in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province, and

there is no water-sharing formula or mechanism between the two sides. The latest reports indicate that India is assisting Afghanistan in constructing [12 hydropower projects](#) on the Kabul River. Seeing the Indian revocation of IWT could well encourage Afghanistan to follow a similar course in a bid to pressure Pakistan on the issue of the Durand Line.

Given that India could become “[water stressed](#)” country by 2025, it will surely pursue alternatives for ensuring water availability even during lean periods. In addition to Pakistan, India also has signed a [30 year](#) bilateral water sharing agreement with Bangladesh in 1996, but the water crisis between the two states still persists. Modi’s visit to Bangladesh in 2015 witnessed the signing of [22 agreements](#), but not a single related to water, which of course enhanced Bangladeshi anxieties. If India is successful in revoking the IWT and the international community can’t effectively forestall the newly emerging Indo-Pak water crisis, New Delhi could also decide to obstruct water flowing toward Bangladesh for power production and irrigation.

India shares water issues with nearly all its seven neighboring states. In the 21st century, where the Indian economy is on the rise and it needs regional peace to grow smoothly, sparking a water crisis will not give India a positive image. Territorial disputes already mar India’s bid to become a vibrant international leader, and revoking the IWT or any other agreement with neighbors could only add insult to injury. At a time when New Delhi is facing a number of water sharing disputes, reviewing a long-settled water-sharing formula with Pakistan would be a harmful option to experiment with. Instead of invalidating existent water-sharing procedures, India should try to find a mutual workable arrangement that could assist all, thus avoiding a water war.

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