

Why the India-Pakistan War Over Water Is So Dangerous

As New Delhi and Islamabad trade nuclear threats and deadly attacks, a brewing war over shared water resources threatens to turn up the violence.

BY **MICHAEL KUGELMAN**

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Early on the morning of Sept. 29, according to India's **Defense Ministry** and **military**, Indian forces staged a "surgical strike" in Pakistan-administered Kashmir that targeted seven terrorist camps and killed multiple militants. Pakistan angrily **denied** that the daring raid took place, though it did **state** that two of its soldiers were killed in clashes with Indian troops along their disputed border. New Delhi's announcement of its strike plunged already tense India-Pakistan relations into deep crisis. It came 11 days after militants identified by India as members of the Pakistani terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammed killed 18 soldiers on a military base in the town of Uri, in India-administered Kashmir.

Amid all the shrill rhetoric and saber rattling emanating from India and Pakistan in recent days — including India's home minister branding Pakistan a "terrorist state" and Pakistan's defense minister threatening to wage nuclear war on India — one subtle threat issued by India may have sounded relatively innocuous to the casual listener.

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In reality, it likely filled Pakistan with fear.

On Sept. 22, India's Foreign Ministry spokesman suggested, cryptically, that New Delhi could revoke the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). "For any such treaty to work," **warned** Vikas Swarup, when asked if India would cancel the agreement, "it is important for mutual trust and cooperation. It cannot be a one-sided affair."

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The IWT is a **56-year-old accord** that governs how India and Pakistan manage the vast Indus River Basin's rivers and tributaries. After David Lilienthal, a former chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority, visited the region in 1951, he was prompted to write an article in *Collier's* magazine, in which he **argued** that a transboundary water accord between India and Pakistan would help ease some of the hostility from the partition — particularly because the rivers of the Indus Basin flow through Kashmir. His idea gained traction and also the support of the World Bank. The bank mediated several years of difficult bilateral negotiations before the parties concluded a deal in 1960. U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower **described** it as a "bright spot" in a "very depressing world picture." The IWT has survived, with few challenges, to the present day.

And yet, it has now come under severe strain.

On Sept. 26, India's government met to review the treaty but **reportedly decided** that it would not revoke the agreement — for now. New Delhi left open the possibility of revisiting the issue at a later date.

Ominously, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi **told** top officials present at the treaty review meeting that "blood and water cannot flow together." Additionally, the government suspended, with immediate effect, meetings between the Indus commissioners of both countries — high-level sessions that ordinarily take place twice a year to manage the IWT and to address any disagreements that may arise from it.

These developments have spooked Pakistan severely. Sartaj Aziz, the foreign affairs advisor to Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, **said** revoking the IWT could be perceived as an "act of war," and he hinted that Pakistan might seek assistance from the United Nations or International Court of Justice.

If India were to annul the IWT, the consequences might well be humanitarian devastation in what is already one of the world's most water-starved countries — an outcome far more harmful and far-reaching than the effects of limited war. Unlike other punitive steps that India could consider taking against its neighbor — including the strikes against Pakistani militants that India claimed to have carried out on Sept. 29 — canceling the IWT could have direct, dramatic, and deleterious effects on ordinary Pakistanis.

The IWT is a very good deal for Pakistan. Although its provisions allocate three rivers each to Pakistan and India, Pakistan is given control of the Indus Basin's three large western rivers — the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab — which **account** for 80 percent of the water in the entire basin. Since water from the Indus Basin flows downstream from India to Pakistan, revoking the IWT would allow India to take control of and — if it created enough storage space through the construction of large dams — stop altogether the flow of those three rivers into Pakistan. To be sure, India would need several years to build the requisite dams, reservoirs, and other infrastructure to generate enough storage to prevent water from flowing downstream to Pakistan. But pulling out of the IWT is the first step in giving India carte blanche to start pursuing that objective.

Pakistan is deeply dependent on those three western rivers and particularly the Indus. In some areas of the country, **including** all of Sindh province, the Indus is the sole source of water for irrigation and human consumption. If Pakistan's access to water from the Indus Basin were cut off or merely reduced, the implications for the country's water security could be catastrophic. For this reason, using water as a weapon could inflict more damage on Pakistan than some forms of warfare.

To understand why, consider the extent of Pakistan's water woes. According to recent **figures** from the International Monetary Fund, Pakistan is one of the most water-stressed countries in the world, with a per capita annual water availability of roughly 35,300 cubic feet — the scarcity threshold. This is all the more alarming given that Pakistan's water intensity rate — a measure of cubic meters used per unit of GDP — is the world's highest. (Pakistan's largest economic sector, agriculture, consumes a whopping **90 percent** of the country's rapidly dwindling water resources.)

In other words, Pakistan's economy is the most water-intensive in the world, and yet it has dangerously low levels of water to work with.

As if that's not troubling enough, consider as well that Pakistan's groundwater tables are plummeting precipitously. NASA satellite data **released** in 2015 revealed that the underwater aquifer in the Indus Basin is the second-most stressed in the world. Groundwater is what nations turn to when surface supplies are exhausted; it is the water source of last resort. And yet in Pakistan, it is increasingly imperiled.

There are other compelling reasons for India not to cancel the IWT, all of which go beyond the hardships the decision could bring to a country where at least 40 million people (of about 200 million) already **lack access** to safe drinking water.

First, revoking the treaty — an international accord mediated by the World Bank and widely regarded as a success story of transboundary water management — would generate intense international opposition. As water expert Ashok Swain has **argued**, revoking the IWT “will bring global condemnation, and the moral high ground, which India enjoys vis-à-vis Pakistan in the post-Uri period will be lost.” Also, the World Bank would likely throw its support behind any international legal action taken by Pakistan against India.

Second, if India decided to maximize pressure on Pakistan by cutting off or reducing river flows to its downstream neighbor, this would bottle up large volumes of water in northern India, a dangerous move that according to water experts could **cause** significant flooding in major cities in Kashmir and in Punjab state (for geographical reasons, India would not have the option of diverting water elsewhere). Given this risk, some analysts have **proposed** that New Delhi instead do something less drastic, and perfectly legal, to pressure Islamabad: build dams on the western rivers of the Indus Basin. The IWT permits this, even though these water bodies are allocated to Pakistan, so long as storage is kept to a minimum to allow water to keep flowing downstream. In fact, according to Indian media **reports**, this is an action Modi's government is now actively considering taking.

Such moves, however, would not be cost-free for Pakistan. According to an **estimate** by the late John Briscoe, one of the foremost experts on South Asia water issues, if India were to erect several large hydroelectric dams on the western rivers, then Pakistan's agriculture could conceivably lose up to a month's worth of river flows — which could ruin an entire planting season. Still, it would not be nearly as serious as the catastrophes that could ensue if India pulls the plug on the IWT.

Third, if India ditches the IWT to punish its downstream neighbor, then it could set a dangerous precedent and give some ideas to Pakistan's ally, China. Beijing has never signed on to any transboundary water management accord, and New Delhi constantly worries about its upstream rival building dozens of dams that cut off river flows into India. The Chinese, perhaps using as a pretext recent Indian defensive **upgrades** in the state of Arunachal Pradesh — which borders China and is claimed by Beijing — could well decide to take a page out of India's book and slow the flow of the mighty Brahmaputra River. It's a move that could have disastrous consequences for the impoverished yet agriculturally productive northeastern Indian state of Assam. The Brahmaputra flows southwest across large areas of Assam. Additionally, Beijing could retaliate by cutting off the flow of the Indus — which originates in Tibet — down to India, depriving New Delhi of the ability to limit the river's flows to Pakistan.

Fourth, India's exit from the IWT could provoke Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the vicious Pakistani terrorist group that carried out the 2008 Mumbai attacks. LeT has long used India's alleged water theft as a chief **talking point** in its anti-India propaganda, even with little evidence that New Delhi has intentionally prevented water from flowing downstream to Pakistan. If India backed out of the treaty and took steps to stop the flow of the Indus Basin's western rivers, LeT would score a major propaganda victory and would have a ready-made pretext to carry out retaliatory attacks in India. An angry Pakistani security establishment, which has close links to LeT, would not go out of its way to dissuade the group from staging such attacks. Indeed, given the damaging effects India's move could have on ordinary Pakistanis in such a water-insecure country, Pakistan would be keen to find ways to strike back at India.

What this all means is that India's cancellation of the IWT would not produce New Delhi's hoped-for result: Pakistani crackdowns on anti-India terrorists. On the contrary, Pakistan might tighten its embrace of such groups. The mere act of canceling the IWT — even if India declines to take steps to reduce water flows to Pakistan — would be treated in Islamabad as a major provocation, with fears that water cutoffs could follow, and thereby spawn retaliations.

To be sure, India has good reason to be unhappy about the IWT. The treaty allocates to India only 20 percent of the entire Indus River Basin's water flows, and New Delhi knows it's gotten the short end of the stick.

Additionally, the IWT's provisions limit India's ability to build hydro-projects in Kashmir. These are significant matters in a nation with its own severe water stress. According to an [estimate](#) by the *New Yorker*, India boasts 20 percent of the world's population but only 4 percent of its water. Not surprisingly, more than 300 million people in India [face](#) water shortages. Severe droughts have contributed to an alarming farmer suicide campaign that has [claimed](#) a staggering 300,000 lives over the last 20 years. And in an ominous indication of what the future may hold, India is [consuming](#) more groundwater than any other country in the world.

All this is to say that India has a strong case for requesting a renegotiation of the treaty. That would be a more prudent strategy than unilaterally revoking it.

India should preserve its decision to keep the IWT in place. Rescinding it could have disastrous consequences for Pakistan — and especially for ordinary Pakistanis — and also damaging results for India. With India-Pakistan relations nearly on a war footing, threatening a course of action that risks humanitarian devastation could bring the subcontinental powder keg one dangerous step closer to exploding.

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Why Colombia's Government Compromised for Peace

The government in Bogotá was winning the war. So why did it decide to give concessions to the rebels anyway?

BY **JAVIER CORRALES**

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This was an important week in the history of peace. On Monday, in the charming colonial city of Cartagena, the Colombian government signed a peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), one of the most vicious and indomitable guerrilla movements in the Americas. By signing the agreement, the FARC essentially agreed to cease to exist, at least as an armed group, and transform itself into a civilian political force.

That the Colombian government, after four years of negotiations, finally managed to get the FARC to lay down its weapons did not come as a complete surprise to observers. The military momentum in the conflict has long been on the side of the government. The process also benefited from a gradual shift in regional politics that deprived the guerrillas of support: Cuba and Venezuela, the FARC's most important allies, stopped supporting some of the FARC's most **insane demands**, and this paved the way for a deal.

The more surprising — and controversial — aspect of the agreement involves the **concessions** the government saw fit to grant the rebels in return for laying down their weapons. This has troubled some Colombians, to an extent that will become fully clear only on October 2, when the country will hold a national plebiscite on the deal.

It is understandable that some would view the government's move with suspicion. After all, this 52-year war generated immense suffering, entailing more than **267,000 deaths**, 46,000 disappearances, 29,000 kidnappings, and an unknown number of sexual crimes, incidents of torture, and other horrors. For many Colombians, an outright victory on the battlefield would have been far more gratifying than one marked by compromise.

In reality, however, there are understandable reasons for the government's decision, and other peacemakers can learn a great deal from this case.

The most controversial concession is the lack of specificity about punishment. Although a mechanism for illuminating past crimes will be established, with the hope that the worst atrocities will be publicly acknowledged and even tried, the 297-page peace agreement offers very little clarity about the consequences of guilt. Some undefined “lesser crimes,” which may include killings, would be eligible for amnesty, and so would some “drug crimes” if they were conducted to finance the war rather than for personal gain. Thus, the agreement comes with some loopholes that could weaken the otherwise strong system of reparations it provides for.

Another controversial concession is that the FARC will be granted five seats in each chamber of Congress for two electoral cycles. Existing laws ban individuals with criminal backgrounds from holding office, so allowing sanctioned FARC members to run for Congress, or even the presidency, violates the law, to say the least.

For the FARC, these concessions are a sweet deal. Prior to the signing ceremony in Cartagena, at their last meeting, the rebels voted unanimously to sign the agreement. But in a country where as many as **60 percent of citizens** report having been victims or having a close relative victimized by the war, the compromises have disappointed. Former president Alvaro Uribe, who is leading the opposition to the accords, **describes** the peace agreement as an amnesty in disguise.

Uribe’s words are no doubt an exaggeration. This is not a blanket amnesty. The agreement stipulates penalties for those who confess (though they will involve community work rather than jail time), and even harsher punishments for those who do not confess and are found guilty of crimes. A lot will depend on judicial discretion, meaning that outcomes will depend on the judges selected. But it is clear that many Colombians would have preferred stronger penalties. More fundamentally, these Colombians are posing a deeper question: Why didn’t the government, which was winning the war militarily, didn’t just finish the job and annihilate the FARC entirely?

This question, in my opinion, can be answered. A combination of military realities, economic incentives, and international pressures precluded the government from winning a complete victory.

On the military side, the chances of fully annihilating the FARC were slim. There is no question that the Colombian state was winning the war. Consider the changes in the **military balance** between the opposing sides. Since the 1990s FARC forces were reduced by half (from approximately 18,000 to 8,000 by 2015), whereas Colombia’s military forces increased by more than 250 percent (from 210,000 to 480,000).

The problem was that the government couldn't win much more than that. With 8,000 guerrillas active, the FARC still had enough power to continue to inflict losses. And as President Juan Manuel Santos himself recognized, **geography matters**: With large parts of Colombia consisting of sparsely populated rainforest, the FARC still had a enough territory on which to hide. Continuing the war, and especially going deeper into the jungle to flush out the last of the rebels, would have been unrealistic.

Continuing the war also has important economic costs. True, the Colombian economy has been improving in recent years, which surely benefitted the war effort. On the other hand, the drug trade has not abated — and this benefited the FARC. Each point deserves some discussion.

There has always been a remarkable paradox in Colombia's economic development. Even during the worst times of the conflict, the country's economy continued to grow. This presents a striking challenge to the assumption that war normally ruins economies. Colombia's economic growth has never been spectacular relative to the Chinas of the world, but it has been less volatile compared to its Latin neighbors. Starting in the 2000s, this growth started to yield serious reductions in poverty: The percentage of the population living below the poverty line **dropped** from 49.7 to 27.8 between 2002 and 2015, according to the World Bank.

Decades of favorable economic conditions explain a dramatic decline in support for left-wing radicalism across the electorate. This has worked in the government's favor. By 2015, according to most polls, the FARC was the most repudiated political force in Colombia. Its bad reputation is due in part to the atrocities the group committed, but also to the fact that the Colombian state delivered economic growth. This allowed the government to contain the FARC, not just militarily, but also politically.

But the FARC had their own economic asset: the drug trade. In Washington and Bogotá, the FARC are routinely referred to as “narco-terrorists” because they extract resources from the drug trade to finance their violence. Essentially, drugs provide the FARC's most important resource. At some point, the Colombian state must have come to the realization that, because the drug trade was limitless, offering no concessions to the FARC would have meant perpetual war. The Colombian state made peace because, unlike the United States, it tacitly recognized that the drug economy is undefeatable.

There is more to the connection between economics and peace in Colombia. Growth, I mentioned, changed Colombian society by making it more middle-income, less poor, and less sympathetic to radicalism. But it also changed the state's calculations. With higher standards of living, the Colombian state realized that the country was now **eligible to apply for OECD membership**. The OECD, an association of the world's most prosperous democracies, is one of the most prestigious international clubs. It is primarily devoted to improving the quality of governance among its members. Only two other Latin American countries, Chile and Mexico, have joined so far.

Once the government realized it was eligible for OECD membership, the opportunity costs of waging continued war increased enormously. More war meant less time and fewer resources to address the OECD's **long list** of application requirements (including infrastructure development, environmental protections, investment facilities, and bribery controls). So the government decided to make a deal.

Colombians will face a complicated moral dilemma when they take to the polls on October 2 to have their say on the agreement. Do they want a harsh justice predicated on punishment and revenge, or do they want a system focused on incentivizing the belligerents to make peace? Those who want the former will probably vote "no," while those who prefer the latter will vote "yes."

But Colombians who are considering rejecting the agreement should bear in mind that an absolute victory over the FARC was never possible, that in the end the government obtained most of its demands, and that even the most perfect forms of justice come with a price. The price of peace has been concessions. The price of revenge would have been more war.

In the photo, some of the witnesses to signing of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC wait for the start of the ceremony in Cartagena, Colombia, on September 26.

Photo credit: LUIS ACOSTA/AFP/Getty Images

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