

# LEAD UPDATE

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## Joint LEAD-QAU Conference on Water Issues: Experts weigh in on Pakistan Transboundary Water Issues 27th June, 2013 Islamabad



Pakistan as a country is facing some of the most acute water related issues. Water by its very nature is fluid and knows no regional or international boundaries. To harness the power of water as a resource, it needs to be managed and developed in an integrated way to maximize both the economic and social needs expected to be realized from its use. In the case of Pakistan, like in most regions of the world, water is a shared resource. We share our water primarily with India on the east and Afghanistan on the west. Shared or transboundary water resources brings increasing complexities to the picture. Water is no longer a purely management issue trying to juggle the sometimes competing economic and social demands but it is now also a national asset which has to be negotiated across international borders.

Water as a transboundary resource, if not handled in a timely and mutually agreeable way will lead to conflicts, rivalries and a skewed inequitably distribution structure. For Pakistan, on one hand we have a water conflict with India on the Indus basin, negotiated and managed under the comprehensive Indus Water Treaty dating back to the 1960. On the other hand we have a brimming potential for conflict with Afghanistan on the Kabul and Chitral rivers with no underlying treaty or negotiations of any sorts. In the backdrop of these issues LEAD in collaboration with QAU held a conference titled 'Water Issues in Pakistan'.

### Background

LEAD's Water Program focuses on research, policy engagement and facilitating dialogues to key issues relating to water in the South Asian region. In an effort to bridge the gap between pure research organizations like universities and policy makes/civic organizations, LEAD has engaged QAU as a

research partner. The joint LEAD-QAU conference on Water Issues in Pakistan was one of the key events in this partnership. The conference featured Dr. John (Jack) Shroder, Professor Emeritus, Department of Geography and Geology, University of Nebraska at Omaha, an eminent researcher and expert in transboundary water between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The other key speaker was Professor Nasrullah Mirza from QAU, who presented his current research on the Pakistan-India water issue and its relationship with the Kashmir deadlock. Both key speakers gave policy recommendations to link their research to on ground realities.

### Conference Discussions

The key note speaker was Dr. John (Jack) Shroder, Professor Emeritus, Department of Geography and Geology, University of Nebraska at Omaha. He knitted his talk around the issue of transboundary waters between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Arid regions like Afghanistan and Pakistan need a sustainable and well managed source of water resources for its domestic needs, irrigation, hydropower generation and other uses - making negotiations on water treaties between the South Asian nations all the more important. Yet centuries of cross-border incursions and an overall depraved behavior have destroyed trust and made such talks most difficult.

In the case of Afghanistan, the technical capacity to hold useful discussions have been gravely lacking because of three decades of turmoil and violence. Education about important water issues is completely absent along with any sort of reasonable record keeping about the resource. In fact, one of the missed opportunities in the past decade has been Afghanistan's failure to legislate a comprehensive water law for the country.

Even at this desperate stage the issues are so complicated for government officials – they do not wish to even put them on the table for discussion.

Afghanistan has had a strikingly low amount of hydro-development for a dry country; in fact, it has one of the lowest water-storage capacities in the world. Downstream riparian states (Pakistan and Iran) have long championed the principle of “no significant harm” against upstream Afghanistan and used the concept as a bulwark against claims by Afghanistan to develop and exploit their own riparian resources.

A possible solution is run-of-the-river dams. Run-of-the-river dams ensure steady flow of water and at the same time provide power generation through hydroelectricity. An intelligent situation would be for Afghanistan to provide electrical power generation for sale to Pakistan, which is chronically short of sufficient power resulting in their all-too-common, “load shedding”. In terms of collaboration between the two countries on transboundary waters, the Kunar River is an ideal starting point. The Kunar River starts as Chitral River in the high mountains of the Hindu Kush and Hindu Raj in northwest Pakistan. Upon reaching Afghanistan it becomes the Kunar River. Here it becomes a tributary to the Kabul River and flows back into Pakistan. Thus Pakistan is both the upstream and downstream country for the river and Afghanistan is the mid-stream nation. In this scenario, the possibility for jointly planned and managed dams in the upstream and mid-stream locations would be an ideal mechanism to ensure collective collaboration benefiting both countries substantially.

In order to reach any progress on transboundary issues it is necessary to bring Pakistan and Afghanistan on the negotiating table. The Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan is an example of a surprisingly successful legal agreement between two otherwise arch rivals. Similar negotiation mechanisms

could be used between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This won't be easy, especially when Afghanistan is not willing to break the linkage between negotiations over transboundary waters and the Durand Line. There is a history of Afghanistan not recognizing the Durand Line. Pakistan being the more developed nation must develop a new mindset to assist its neighbor in building their water infrastructure rather than opposing it. A Kabul River water treaty can be a win-win for both countries.

**The other main speaker was Prof. Nasrullah Mirza of Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. Prof Mirza talked about his current research on the India-Pak Kashmir dispute and its connection with the Indus water resources.**

The real political dimension of the Kashmir conflict surfaced when India withheld the river water supply to Pakistan on 1 April 1948. The roots of the intertwined nature of the Kashmir and Indus disputes can be traced to the Radcliffe boundary award, under which India gained control of the headwork of two rivers providing irrigation to Punjab, Pakistan. The issue became serious when India captured parts of Kashmir and gained access to the catchment areas for the whole of Indus system, including its five tributaries—the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Sutlej, and Beas rivers. This was now a question of survival for Pakistan. Hence, the Kashmir dispute and Indus water conflict are intertwined in nature and have strong linkages with war and peace between India and Pakistan.

History presents a number of examples where otherwise arch rivals agree to some sort of solution in the case of water disputes as opposed to war. The signing of IWT between arch rivals India and Pakistan, in 1960, is such an example. The puzzle here is – how come Pakistan and India reached a treaty on international rivers, originating from Kashmir territory, but both never compromised on Kashmir itself. The dispute of Kashmir is much more than an issue of conflicting ideologies and identity politics between India and Pakistan.

Kashmir is a strategically important territory where water resources can be developed and preserved. The melting of snows and high summer precipitation in Kashmir is the only source of water feeding the entire Indus river system.

From the above analysis, both Pakistan and India are interested in Kashmir not only due to purely political reasons but also because they have a high stake and interest in the Kashmir territory with respect to its strategic position as the feeding ground to the Indus river system. So Indo-Pak conflict is not exclusively identity-based, rather neo-realistic interests bounded in Kashmir territory are also at play here. Each country weighs up its costs and benefits to improve on their current position. The current case of Pakistan and India can be explained by Zartman's theory of “mutually hurting stalemate”. In this case rivals accommodate each other to balance the potential loss and gain to be incurred from any change in status quo.

### Conclusion

The Conference was the first event in the LEAD-QAU partnership to further research and dialogue on water issues. The event was organized with the aim of presenting the works of a leading American and Pakistani researchers on transboundary water issues. The conference entailed useful discussion on Afghanistan-Pakistan and India-Pakistan transboundary water issues and relationships. The first presentation addressed the water negotiation deadlock between Pakistan and Afghanistan and what can be done to solve it. Further the role of Pakistan, being the more developed country, to take the lead on negotiations and any water resource development in Afghanistan was emphasized. The second presentation addressed the transboundary water conflict between India and Pakistan. The presenter linked it with the Kashmir issue and offered an interesting take to explain the deadlock between India and Pakistan.