

Transboundary water cooperation: An instrument for peace

After the Pakistan General Elections 2018, the upcoming government has revealed the broad layout of its policies through the victory speech and the inaugural address of the Prime Minister. It provides a clear focus on how to combat climate change and the much-needed foreign policy. The foreign policy mainly revolves around all of our bordering states.

Among the four bordering states, Pakistan shares its waters with two of its neighbours; India and Afghanistan. With India, Pakistan signed a landmark water agreement in 1960, the '[Indus Water Treaty](#)' that gives India the proprietary right of the three eastern rivers; Beas, Ravi, and Sutlej. While control over the water flowing in three western rivers- the Indus, Chenab, and Jhelum were given to Pakistan. However, no such treaty exists between Pakistan and Afghanistan over the Kabul River- one of the major tributaries of the Indus River, which contributes 10 to 12 percent of the Indus River System flow.

On the other hand, Afghanistan resolved its water issues with Iran long ago by signing a water treaty on Helmond River in 1970. This is all a prelude to the promising aspect of the upcoming government's intention, expressed in its victory and inaugural speeches to promote peace in the region and jointly face the menace of climate change.

As argued by the complex interdependence theorists, increased interdependence in terms of trade volume and benefit sharing of the flowing waters would raise the stakes of states in the maintenance of peace. The increased interdependence would reduce the trust deficit among the states and may help them to resolve their outstanding issues.

The famous idealist of the Eighteenth Century, Immanuel Kant, produced his short essay titled 'Perpetual peace'; one of the points of his theory focused on 'how Trade between states' promotes peace. A very relevant example for Pakistan could be China and India, which, despite their historical mistrust, shelved their differences to benefit from mutual trade.

Europe that has been the center stage of all the wars in the world including the thirty years of war during 1617-1648, has learned its lesson. They have come up with mutual trade and transboundary water agreements among neighbouring states. Danube River, the second largest river in Europe, passes through nine countries, setting an astonishing example for other countries with shared basins. The Danube River Protection Convention forms the overall legal instrument for cooperation on transboundary water management in the Danube River basin. The Convention was signed on June 29, 1994, in Sofia (Bulgaria) and came into force in 1998. It aims to ensure that surface waters and groundwater within the Danube River basin are managed and used sustainably and equitably.

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Similarly, the mighty Amazon River in South America constitutes around 20 percent of the total surface water on earth, it passes through eight countries. The Amazon Cooperation Treaty was signed among the member states and was primarily designed to foster sustainable development of the Amazon River. Member states are committed to joint actions aimed to produce equitable and mutually beneficial results and also achieve the preservation of the environment. Another example is the Nile River (second longest river of the world) which passes through nine countries. All these countries are considering signing the Cooperative Framework Agreement (which has already been signed by six countries).

Climate change is considered as a momentous concern in the transboundary basin, and transboundary Kabul River basin is no exception which serves as a water supply source for more than 20 million people. As a matter of fact, the co-riparian i.e. Pakistan and Afghanistan, will not only be facing climate change impacts within their own territory but they will also be affected due to a climate-induced large-scale calamity across the border. Interestingly, both these countries are in such a unique setting on the Kabul River that both are lower and upper riparian at the same time. Kabul River is predominantly a snow-fed river with a slight contribution from the glaciers. Recently, Global Change Impact Studies Centre conducted a research to analyse temporal and spatial snow cover changes of the Kabul River basin during the first 16 years of the twenty-first century. Although no significant change in temporal and spatial extent was found in the seasonal snow cover overall.

So far many factors have hampered bilateral cooperation efforts; the factors are complex in nature and include the power asymmetry between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the decades-old dispute over the Durand Line, and the recent dispute between Pakistan and India over the Indus River. There are certain ways through which effective and sustainable cross-border cooperation regarding water can be achieved, improvement of hydro meteorological knowledge sharing with Afghanistan, the establishment of a formal confidence-building framework to share water policies between the two countries. In addition to this, there should be a mobilisation of support from the international community to move towards regional rather than national water strategies and initiate a multilateral dialogue process to build confidence and establish an agenda for a cross-border water management mechanism, with a focus on intergovernmental river-basin-based water security watchdogs to ensure that the stipulated terms are carried out.

Moreover, Pakistan and Afghanistan should also look into the historical agreements in similar shared basins across the globe and formulate an agreement based on benefit sharing and a joint climate change action plan, with a focus on dealing with floods, across the Kabul River basin. This basin

is of particular importance to Pakistan with respect to its share of water supply committed for agricultural use in the middle to lower parts of the country whereas for Afghanistan it can be a major source of power generation.

In the light of aforementioned idealist theories and water cooperation examples from around the world, it is very promising to see if the ideas promulgated in the inaugural speech could be implemented for the betterment of the region.

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