

Water and peace

The new government revealed the broad layout of its policies through the PM's victory speech and inaugural address. It provided a clear focus to combat climate change and strengthen the much-needed foreign policy that mainly revolves around all of our bordering states.

Pakistan shares its waters with two of its neighbors: India and Afghanistan. With India, Pakistan signed a landmark water agreement in 1960, the Indus Waters Treaty, that gives India the proprietary right for three eastern rivers – Beas, Ravi and Sutlej – and Pakistan control over the water flowing in three western rivers – the Indus, Chenab and Jhelum. However, no such treaty exists between Pakistan and Afghanistan over River Kabul – one of the major tributaries of River Indus, contributing between 10 percent and 12 percent of the flows in the Indus water system.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan had resolved its water issues with Iran long ago by signing a water treaty on River Helmand in 1970. This is a prelude to the promising aspect of the intentions that the new government expressed in the PM's 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, with increased interdependence in terms of trade volume and benefit-sharing, the flowing waters would raise the stakes of states in maintaining peace. Increased interdependence would reduce the trust deficit among states and may help them resolve their issues down the line.

In his short essay, titled 'Perpetual peace', Immanuel Kant, the famous idealist of the 18th century, focused on "trade between states" to promote peace. A relevant example for Pakistan could be that of China and India. Despite their history of mistrust, both shelved their differences in order to pave the ground for mutual trade.

Europe, which has been at the centre-stage of all the wars in the world, including the 30 years of war during 1617-1648, has learnt its lesson. European countries have come up with mutual trade and transboundary water agreements among neighbouring states. River Danube, the second largest river in the 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 water and groundwater within the Danube River Basin are managed and used sustainably and equitably.

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

Climate change is being considered as a pressing concern in the transboundary basin across the globe and the transboundary River Kabul Basin is no exception as it serves as a water-supply source for more than 20 million people. As a matter of fact, the co-riparian – Pakistan and Afghanistan – will not only be facing the impacts of climate change within their own territory, but will also be affected due to a climate-induced large-scale calamities across the border.

Interestingly, both these countries are in such a unique setting on River

Kabul that both are lower and upper riparian at the same time. River Kabul is predominantly a snow-fed river with a slight contribution from glaciers.

Recently, scientists from the Global Change Impact Studies Centre conducted research to analyse temporal and spatial snow-cover changes of the Kabul River Basin during the first 16 years of the 21st century. Although no significant change in temporal and spatial extent was found in the seasonal snow cover overall, rising temperatures – especially at higher rates in the higher-elevation zones in the basin – may result in snow melting more quickly, resulting in more flashfloods.

In the unprecedented floods of 2010 in Pakistan, there was a prominent contribution from River Kabul generated from the excessive melting of snow. The shared use of transboundary water between these two countries is central in establishing regional peace and stability.

There are certain ways through which effective and sustainable cross-border cooperation on water can be achieved. There is severe data scarcity regarding the Kabul River Basin that has hindered a highly reliable scientific analysis. Joint efforts are required to substantially improve the hydro-meteorological network in the basin and the mutual sharing of data and knowledge products, and establish a formal confidence-building framework to mutually share water policies. We must also mobilise support from the international community to move towards regional water strategies. Efforts to initiate a multilateral dialogue process to build confidence and establish an agenda for a cross-border water management mechanism and intergovernmental river basin-based water security watchdogs are also needed.

In addition to this, Pakistan and Afghanistan should also look into the historical agreements in similar shared basins across the globe and formulate an agreement focused on benefit-sharing and a joint climate change action plan, with a prime focus on dealing with floods across the Kabul River Basin.

This basin is of a 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. For Afghanistan, it can be a major source of power generation which can be used during severe winter seasons that characterise the part of the basin on Afghanistan side. In a nutshell, international instruments and treaties ought to be consulted and best practices in the successful management of watersheds should be adopted by the two riparian countries.

In light of these idealistic theories and water-cooperation examples from around the world, we must see if the ideas promulgated through the PM's inaugural speech can be implemented for the betterment of the region and to assuage the audacious sentiments that occasionally appear on either side of the borders. The talks could result in benefit-sharing in transboundary basins on both sides of the border – in Kabul and Indus river basins.

The writers are water researchers at the Global Change Impact Studies Centre.