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## **Rivers that connect and divide**



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### **Article Content:**

*The suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty reflects a broader shift in India's foreign policy—a willingness to revisit outdated arrangements where strategic asymmetries have widened*

For over six decades, the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) has been hailed as a triumph of diplomacy and resilience—surviving wars, terrorism, and deep political hostility between India and Pakistan. Brokered by the World Bank and signed in 1960, the treaty allocated control of the eastern rivers of the Indus system (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej) to India and the western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab) to Pakistan, while permitting limited Indian use of the western rivers for non-consumptive purposes such as hydroelectric generation, navigation and irrigation.

The original intent of the treaty was to reduce friction over vital water resources, enabling peaceful coexistence. However, Pakistan was the first to use the treaty less as a means of cooperation, and more as a tool of obstruction and diplomatic warfare. Repeated challenges to India's legitimate hydroelectric projects—such as Kishanganga and Ratle—have been filed at international forums, causing delays, inflating project costs, and undermining India's development agenda, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir.

Further, Pakistan's simultaneous pursuit of neutral expert intervention and appeals to the Court of Arbitration violated the graded dispute resolution mechanism explicitly outlined in the treaty. Such actions not only breach procedural integrity, but also reveal Islamabad's tactic of leveraging the treaty as a political instrument rather than honoring it as a mechanism for peaceful resolution.

As the upper riparian, India could have modulated Pakistan's water availability right after 1965 and certainly after the 1971 war, putting economic and political pressure on Islamabad. As a responsible nation taking a humane stance, India did not exercise this option despite the extreme events.

However, this stance could not last forever. Based on Pakistan's own patterns of using IWT as a strategic tool, India has increasingly signaled its use of the treaty as a lever to pressure Pakistan to cease cross-border terrorism and other destabilising activities. After the 2016 Uri attack and the 2019 Pulwama attack, the Indian leadership and think tanks discussed re-evaluating the IWT. In January 2023, India issued a notice to Pakistan seeking modification of the treaty under Article XII.

Post the inhuman targeting of unarmed civilians at Pahalgalam, India's move to suspend the IWT is a logical next step in the country's long-term interest. It is aligned with its broader foreign policy doctrine that demands reciprocity in international arrangements.

The precipitate action marks an important shift in India's strategic posture: moving from passive tolerance to active rebalancing. India will move to maximise the use of eastern rivers and expedite hydropower projects on the western rivers as part of a strategy to impose indirect, but significant, strategic costs on Pakistan without crossing into open military conflict.

The economic and social consequences would be severe for Pakistan. Over 80 percent of Pakistan's irrigated land depends on waters from the Indus system. The economies of Punjab and Sindh, Pakistan's agricultural heartlands, rely almost entirely on the consistent flow of these rivers for crops like wheat, rice, sugarcane and cotton. Any disruption would likely precipitate acute food insecurity, a sharp decline in agricultural exports such as basmati rice and mangoes, and energy shortages, given that hydropower constitutes 25-30 percent of Pakistan's electricity generation.

The stresses would ripple across Pakistan's economy, exacerbating inflation, widening the current account deficit, and fostering social unrest, particularly in already fragile provinces like Sindh and Balochistan. In short, Pakistan's water, food and energy securities are intricately tied to the continued functioning of the IWT, making Islamabad significantly vulnerable.

Should India stay the course, Pakistan would undoubtedly mount a vigorous international response. It could appeal to the World Bank, the treaty's guarantor, or invoke international water norms by approaching the International Court of Justice. Islamabad would likely raise the issue in the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council, alleging humanitarian violations, and galvanise diplomatic support from friendly nations such as China and Turkey.

A parallel global media campaign could portray India's actions as an aggression against a vulnerable population's right to water. However, while these actions might generate diplomatic noise, they would not easily compel India to reverse course, especially if New Delhi remains within the legal limits of permissible action under the treaty. There is a large scope of actions that India can take to decrease the current water flows, while remaining compliant with the otherwise suspended treaty, India's signaling of potential suspension is not merely an act of retaliation.

It reflects a broader assertiveness in India's foreign policy—a willingness to revisit outdated arrangements where strategic asymmetries have grown too wide. While the signal from India is clear, the country will act with a sense of responsibility as a major Asian power that shares other multi-country riparian river systems like the Brahmaputra and the Ganga.

India's optimal strategy lies in maximal legal utilisation of its entitlements under the treaty. New Delhi must expedite all permissible run-of-the-river hydroelectric projects, fully use its share of the eastern river waters, build storage structures within treaty limits, and simultaneously engage in proactive diplomacy to frame its actions globally as a rightful rebalancing. The global narrative must be shifted to equity, adaptation to climate realities, and modernisation of a treaty that is outdated, and was misused by Pakistan as strategic leverage.

The IWT was a product of its time—an ingenious solution for a newly-partitioned subcontinent facing immense political and humanitarian upheaval. Yet, today's realities—geopolitical, climatic and strategic—demand fresh approaches. India's recent moves, while called aggressive in some quarters, represent a necessary and prudent recalibration driven by imperatives of national security, economic development, and environmental stewardship.

Ultimately, the water of the Indus will continue to flow—but whether they will symbolise cooperation or conflict depends on Pakistan's willingness to shed the ghosts of the past, and engage with India in light of the realities of today, for the sake of a better tomorrow