

HYDRO-POLITICS AND REGIONAL SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA: THE INDUS WATERS TREATY AS A MECHANISM OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN INDIA–PAKISTAN RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Water is currently a significant component of international politics as it is mainly found in regions with transboundary rivers and geopolitical conflicts. The Indus Water Treaty (IWT) between India and Pakistan signed in 1960 is one of the most long-lasting examples of water co-operation despite the fact that the countries are still engaged in political and military tensions. This paper will focus on how the Indus Water Treaty serves as an example of conflict management and discuss its significance for regional security in South Asia. Drawing on theories of hydro-politics, water security, and conflict management, the study employs a qualitative research approach that draws on treaty documents, academic literature, and other secondary sources. This paper asserts that while the Indus Waters Treaty has been unable to resolve political tensions between the two countries, it has succeeded in creating a solid platform for communication, conflict resolution, and the management of water tensions. It now faces new issues, such as climate change, rising water demand, hydropower production, and deteriorating relations between the two nations, which strain the treaty regime. In conclusion, maintaining effective water diplomacy will be crucial to preserving regional stability and avoiding the securitisation of water issues.

KEYWORDS: *Hydro-politics, Regional Security, Indus Waters Treaty, India–Pakistan Relations, Water Security, Conflict Management.*

INTRODUCTION

Given the increasing scarcity of water, its strategic importance, and its essential role in economic development and human security is increasing day by day. Water has become a crucial element of international politics today. However, water is becoming a political and security issue due to the growing pressure on water resources resulting from population growth, urbanisation, industrialisation, and climate change. The sharing of many major international river systems among several states gave rise to a new category of interstate cooperation and conflict such as transboundary water resources. The idea of "hydro-politics" has come to the limelight in Political Science and International Relations studies, which is described as the "political aspects of interactions, power arrangements and institutional arrangements of shared water resources" (Turton, 2002; Zeitoun & Warner, 2006).

South Asia is one of the most important regions to analyse the relationship between hydro-politics and regional security. The area is heavily populated, has growing water needs, and is highly vulnerable to interstate conflicts. The Indus

River Basin is one of the most significant transboundary river systems in South Asia, with economic, strategic, and geopolitical importance. The basin is home to millions of people in both India and Pakistan and provides essential irrigation, drinking, and hydropower. For a long time, managing the Indus River system has been connected to issues of security and interstate relations (Briscoe, 2010).

With the partition of British India in 1947, the Indus River basin became a transboundary region of two newly independent states. The division caused confusion and uncertainty among them about the water issue and control over the river infrastructure, leading to conflicts that could worsen relations between India and Pakistan. To meet these challenges, the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) was signed under the auspices of the World Bank in 1960. The treaty gave India the three eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej), with the three western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab) mostly reserved for Pakistan. At the same time, specific rights were granted to India (World Bank 1960). The treaty also included provisions for institutional arrangements, such as the Permanent Indus Commission, for

communication and the settlement of issues between the two countries.

The Indus Waters Treaty has gone beyond the technical distribution of water resources. The treaty has withstood numerous wars, armed conflicts and times of diplomatic crisis between India and Pakistan in the last 60 years. Scholars have viewed the treaty as one of the most successful instances of international water cooperation and as a significant tool for managing conflicts over shared water resources (Biswas, 1992; Wolf, 1998). Previous works on the treaty have primarily addressed legal aspects, institutional design, water sharing, and the technical aspects of hydroelectric projects (Salman & Upreti, 2002; Briscoe, 2010). Other researchers have examined how climate change, water scarcity, and hydropower development will affect the future sustainability of the treaty framework (Mustafa, 2010). These works have contributed significantly to understanding the dynamics of water governance in the Indus Basin. However, little attention has been paid in context of its role to conflict management within the broader regional security context in South Asia.

In this regard, this study aims to explore the role of the Indus Waters Treaty in easing water-related conflicts and stabilising relations between India and Pakistan. The paper states that the treaty has been an effective institutional framework that has helped both nations resolve their differences by following agreed protocols, preventing the conflict from spreading into wider political or military conflicts. The existing framework is also under pressure due to new challenges, such as climate change, demographic pressures, rising water demand, and deteriorating bilateral relations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

With the growing significance of transboundary water resources in international politics, a wide body of research on 'hydro-politics' has emerged. Initial research indicated that water scarcity is likely to lead to conflict between states, especially in areas with competing development needs. Allan (2001) suggested that water is now becoming a more strategic resource, affecting political and economic relations between states. Turton (2002), on the other hand, defined hydro-politics as the politics of management and political power in the same river basins and Ogden (2002) described it as the relationship between political power, resource management and political authority within common river basins. Going an extra mile, Zeitoun and Warner (2006) came up with the term h-hydro-hegemony that it acknowledged the significance of power inequalities in the management of transboundary water systems.

There has been a wide range of literature focusing specifically on the significance of the Indus Waters Treaty in

India–Pakistan relations. This treaty despite the regular political tensions between the two countries was a success according to Biswas (1992), as one of the most successful models of water cooperation. The institutional design and the explicit water allocation arrangements in the treaty, which have helped in its longevity, were emphasised by Salman and Upreti (2002). Briscoe (2010) explored the treaty in light of shifting developmental and environmental challenges. Despite its durability, it has withstood new currents of contention driven by changing water needs and infrastructure.

The scholarship on water security and conflict management is another area that has been examined. A comprehensive international study of river basins conducted by Wolf (1998) found that conflicts over shared water are less likely than cooperation and that institutional arrangements generally help defuse potential conflicts. Dinar (2008) also stressed that cooperative behaviour and the prevention of resource-based conflicts depend greatly on international agreements. Grey and Sadoff's (2007) proposal of water security extended the notion of water security to the wider goals of sustainable development, political stability and human security. The studies show that the institutional arrangements can turn the potentially conflicting resources into forums for cooperation and confidence-building.

The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) has been the subject of recent debate, with the impacts of climate change, water security, and shifting geopolitics in South Asia under consideration. Mirumachi (2021) argues that the analysis of transboundary water governance focuses on the interplay between environmental factors and political power dynamics. Mustafa et al. (2021) have noted the growing importance of water security narratives in policy discourses on the Indus Basin. Likewise, Daoudy (2022) notes that climate-induced uncertainties will most likely aggravate hydro-political issues in shared river basins. More recently, Haines (2022) has returned to the treaty's significance in conflict management and suggested that institutional adaptation will be essential to address new environmental and strategic issues. The findings suggest that the sustainability of the treaty will depend not only on its legal terms and conditions, but also on its capacity to adapt to new political and ecological circumstances.

Many studies have been conducted on the subject, however, there is a gap in the literature which still persists. It is important to note that, despite the attention given to the legal, technical, environmental, and institutional aspects of the Indus Waters Treaty, little attention has been paid to examining the treaty as a conflict management tool in the context of regional security. The majority of research focuses on how the water-sharing arrangements are put into practice or on environmental issues in the basin, with security issues being subsumed under

these latter two themes. With this, it aims to fill the aforementioned lacuna by analysing the treaty's impact on managing interstate tensions, maintaining communication during times of crisis, and boosting regional stability amid the longstanding political antagonism between India and Pakistan. The study, in turn, helps fill a gap in a more holistic picture of the link between hydro-politics, institutional cooperation, and regional security in South Asia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY.

This research falls into the wider body of literature on hydro-politics, water security and conflict management in international relations. For analysing the interaction between states over shared water resources and the influence of political, economic, and strategic interests on the governance of transboundary river systems, an analytical framework of Hydro-politics is useful (Turton, 2002). The notion of water security concerns the availability of an adequate and sufficient quantity of water on a reliable basis to support human well-being, economic development, and ecological stability (Grey & Sadoff, 2007).

A second theoretical concept used in the study is conflict management, which is used to analyse the functioning of institutional mechanisms for settling interstate conflicts. In short, conflict management is the means by which parties try to manage, control, and settle conflicts without necessarily resolving them (Bercovitch, 1997). Treaties, commissions, and conflict-resolution mechanisms are important elements in resolving water-related disputes and preventing them from becoming political and military conflicts in transboundary water governance. The Indus Waters Treaty can therefore be read not only as a treaty on water sharing but also as an institutional arrangement for conflict management and communication between two warring states.

The theoretical analysis is based on two perspectives viz. Realism and Liberal Institutionalism. The realist theory of international politics suggests that politics is a zero-sum game in which states compete for power, security and national interest in a state of anarchy (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). Viewed this way, water is a very strategic resource that can shape state action and regional influence. However, cooperation in the Indus Basin is not sufficient to explain the mistrust and strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan. Cooperation on the Indus Basin alone is not sufficient to account for the persistence of mistrust and strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan. What is more, it provides information on the political and security issues in which water-related infrastructure projects frequently become entangled.

Liberal Institutionalism, on the other hand, focuses on the ability of international institutions and treaties to enable

cooperation between states despite political disagreements (Keohane, 1984). From this viewpoint, institutions lower uncertainty, increase transparency, set rules of behaviour, and establish mechanisms for dispute resolution. The Indus Waters Treaty takes account of these institutional traits by setting out concrete water-sharing provisions and establishing the Permanent Indus Commission as a forum for ongoing discussions. The longevity of the treaty in the face of successive wars and diplomatic crises reinforces the institutionalist view that cooperative mechanisms can help to reduce conflict and promote peaceful relations between states.

Methodologically, this study is a descriptive research with a qualitative and an analytical approach. The analysis is mainly based on secondary sources, including the text of the Indus Waters Treaty, World Bank Reports, academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers, and official government documents. A qualitative approach is suitable, as the study aims to understand the treaty's political and strategic implications rather than deal with quantitative variables. The paper discusses the historical background, institutional arrangements as well as the contemporary problems of the Indian subcontinent. It evaluates whether the IWT has proved to be an effective tool of conflict resolution and has contributed towards instilling security in South Asia.

DISCUSSION

In the analysis of politics of water and the security of the region, Indus Water Treaty is a monument to the cooperation between institutions in the shadow of a deep political hatred and regular interstate mistrust. The treaty is over 60 years old and unlike most international agreements has never been affected by any political changes between India and Pakistan. It is persistent, and some important questions can be raised on the topic of the interaction of resource governance, interstate collaboration, and conflict resolution. Under a regime in which securitisation is so intense, the treaty states that common natural assets may come into the discourse and institutional action. The IWT is hence an off-putting of the fact that strategic competition necessarily leads to the disintegration of co-operative endeavours.

The treaty embodies the seasoned politics of power, geography, and reliance on resources. Not only is water an environmental and economic resource but it is directly linked to food security, energy production and development in countries. In South Asian region, water resources are a key determinant as agriculture is still excessively dependent on the rivers. This reality has contributed to the "securitisation of water" in India and Pakistan, where discussions on river management are often linked to ideas of sovereignty and national security. The political dimension of water governance is a case in point of

how transboundary rivers can be sites of larger geopolitical conflicts. The consequences are that the management of shared water resources must not be addressed in isolation from the broader political landscape in which interstate relations take place.

The treaty also offers insights into the importance of institutions in conflict resolution. While international agreements are usually assessed on their dispute-resolution capabilities, it is better to aim to manage conflict rather than resolve it, as the Indus Waters Treaty case has shown. It is not possible to do away with all differences in national interests, developmental priorities and security perceptions. However, there may be ways to establish procedures and norms to eliminate uncertainty and manage disagreement. In that sense, the agreement can be considered a model of how institutional mechanisms can help to promote dialogue and avoid the risk of escalating tensions into wider conflicts. The ongoing relevance of the treaty indicates that viable governance regimes can help to foster stability despite unsettled political relations.

Liberal Institutionalism, on the other hand, provides a convincing account of how rivalry can coexist with cooperation. Arrangements within institutions lower transaction costs, establish rules of interaction, and provide forums for dialogue. Formal procedures foster the possibility of states resolving disputes through formal processes rather than unilateral action. The Indus Waters Treaty is a good example of institutionalised cooperation that can withstand political crises, as it has a practical significance for both sides. The treaty, therefore, demonstrates that cooperation and competition do not mutually exclude one another; they coexist within the broader context of interstate relations. The observation is part of a growing debate on the ability of international institutions to shape state action in conflict areas. Strategic competition and institutional cooperation are a combination of Realism and Liberal Institutionalism.

The importance of water diplomacy as a tool for peacebuilding in the region is also emphasised. Technical cooperation over shared resources can ensure the continuity of communication in an area where political dialogue is likely to become frustrated amid security crises. Bilaterally, opportunities exist for interaction around water issues that may be less politically charged than other areas of bilateral relations. Such cooperation can help foster confidence and mitigate the risk of miscommunication and misperceptions, but it does not resolve political disagreements. Water diplomacy is not a magic formula for changing interstate relations; rather, its value lies in maintaining dialogue during periods of tension.

There has been a resurgence in discussions about the future of the Indus Waters Treaty in recent times. With India

and Pakistan posing a greater security risk than ever, and India having resolved to keep the treaty in abeyance in 2025, experts and policy analysts are now questioning the extent to which the current treaty can help meet the demands of the contemporary geopolitics. Other analysts think that the treaty should be revised in the light of this dynamic security environment, the new developmental agenda of the two countries and climate variability. But there are those who say that the treaty is among the few institutional frameworks that will still be able to keep the debate alive between the two. The discussion represents a change in hydro-politics of South Asia, and a rise of water management as a part of strategic competition and national security. At the same time, the effects of climate change and the growing water stress have contributed to the increased necessity in collaborative efforts to exchange data, track the environment, and adjust water use. All these changes show that the future viability of the treaty will not only be based on the legal provisions of the treaty but the capability of the treaty to transform itself with the changing political and environmental contexts and yet maintain its functions of conflict management.

To sum it up, the issue of transboundary water governance is a political and institutional problem. It is not only about resources, but also about the security, cooperation and stability of the region. The treaty portrays that strategic competition is a reality of Indo-Pak relations, yet there exist institutional arrangements that can offer an opportunity to cooperate, as well as conflict management. The experience of the Indus Waters Treaty is especially pertinent today when the amount of environmental uncertainty and strain on freshwater sources in South Asia seem elevated.

FINDINGS

This study suggests that the treaty determined the division of the rivers (Eastern R rivers Ravi, Beas and Sutlej) between India and the western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab) between India and Pakistan, thereby providing a simple cut-and-dried formula of share of water and elimination of direct water-sharing disputes (World Bank, 1960). Its clarity in the provision has made a huge contribution towards its strength and relevance over the last 60 years.

The fact that the treaty has survived even under extremely volatile India-Pakistan relations is among the key discoveries of the study. Such critical challenges that the treaty has survived through include Wars of 1965 and 1971, the Kargil conflict of 1999 and diplomatic conflicts in twenty-first century. The Indus Waters treaty is a bilateral agreement which has endured such interruptions when there has been an increase in political tensions compared to many other treaties of that nature who have lost their relevance in such situations.

The paper also shows that the institutional framework that was created by the treaty has significantly led to its success. The exchange of information, technical consultation and communication between the two countries have been successful at the Permanent Indus Commission. Through the Commission, the weaving of fishery and river management alongside the infrastructure development have been facilitated regularly. Moreover, the treaty has dispute settlement processes which include the institutional processes of Neutral Experts and Courts of Arbitration which have provided orderly and non-violent channels to dispute resolution. These have proved to be relevant in ensuring that water based conflicts are not used as a political hot spot in the example of the Baglihar, Kishanganga as well as Ratle hydropower projects.

The role of the treaty in resolving conflicts and stability in the region is one of the most significant ones. The discussion proposes that the treaty has been beyond a water-sharing treaty. It has served as a channel for engagement that has been in place and has continued to operate even when other bilateral engagement initiatives have been paralysed. Through the treaty, conflict resolution and communication has been facilitated and this has assisted in the prevention of water related disputes. As a matter of fact, the modern applicability of the treaty is not based solely on the water allocation, but on its capacity to curb the element of uncertainty and preserving the institutional connections between confronting states.

Also, the findings indicate that the treaty has meaning beyond Water Governance. It is one of the very few bilateral mechanisms that have crossed a long period of political tension and has become significant as a communication link between India and Pakistan. This institutional continuity has contributed to minimising uncertainty and to allowing engagement even when wider diplomatic activities were suspended. Thus, the treaty must be seen as far more than just a water sharing agreement, but as a means of regional security stabilisation within the broader framework of South Asian security.

Meanwhile, the results point to several new issues that could come between the treaty's chances of success. Climate Change, glacier retreat, erratic precipitation, growing water needs, population growth and a proliferation of hydropower development have added new layers of complexity to the governance of the Indus Basin. These developments have led to growing anxiety about water security and sparked a debate on the meaning and application of treaty obligations. However, IWT offers a potentially useful institutional structure for cooperation despite the difficulties. It plays a critical role of institutionalised water governance in ensuring stability, conflict resolution and cooperation because of its durability and flexibility in an area plagued by longstanding political tensions and strategic competition.

CONCLUSION

In the modern international system, the Indus Waters Treaty has left an enduring imprint on the history of transboundary water cooperation. It is a valuable case study in the field of hydro-politics and regional security. The current paper has attempted to analyse the impact of the treaty on India-Pakistan relations through the lens of 'hydro-politics,' 'conflict management,' and 'regional security.' The analysis shows that, despite ongoing political tensions and strategic rivalry in bilateral relations, the treaty has established a viable institutional structure for managing shared water resources. The treaty has remained a means of resolving water conflicts without the risk of wider political and military conflicts, more than 60 years after it was signed.

The study emphasises that the water regimes and institutional arrangements, along with the dispute-resolution procedures established in the treaty, are a major reason for the treaty's durability. The Permanent Indus Commission, in conjunction with provisions for Neutral Experts and Courts of Arbitration, has helped both countries to resolve conflicts through technical and legal means, with established procedures. These have facilitated communication and cooperation even during periods of war, diplomatic crises and high political tension. The treaty has come to be more than a water-sharing agreement and it has turned out to be a significant instrument of conflict management and confidence-building in South Asia.

The paper also demonstrates how the treaties of the Indus Waters treaty represent the elements of cooperation and struggle in international politics. Realist conceptions of the strategic use of water resources and the longevity of mistrust based on historical political distrust go some way to explain why the treaty has been the subject of continued mistrust even amongst those who signed; Liberal Institutionalism provides perspective on the sustainability of the treaty and how institutions can foster cooperation between states that once were enemies. In this respect, the treaty is a good reflection of how institutional arrangements can help minimize the uncertainty, enhance dialogue, and create regional stability in the face of continuing geopolitical tensions.

To conclude, the Indus Waters Treaty provides a blueprint for conflict management and helps in promoting regional peace and stability in a region marked by significant political tension. The treaty did not address the major differences between India and Pakistan, but has successfully kept water-related issues apart from major conflicts and has ensured continuity of talks between the two countries in times of high tension. This legacy of its continued relevance makes calls for enhanced water diplomacy and the development of new governance mechanisms more urgent in the face of new

environmental and political realities. The lessons learnt from the Indus Waters Treaty experience in water resources management are relevant, and the potential of cooperative institutions to nurture peace and security in conflict-prone areas cannot be overlooked.

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