JINDAL CENTRE FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

POLICY BRIEF

From Treaty to Tension: India, Pakistan, and the Crisis of Water Diplomacy in the Global South

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Introduction

In an era marked by intensifying geopolitical rivalries and climatic pressures, transboundary water treaties are increasingly under strain. This fragility is nowhere more apparent than in the Global South, particularly in South Asia, where the Indus River system, embodies the vulnerabilities of shared water management, with its headworks in India and canals in Pakistan In 2025, India's suspension of its participation in the Indus Water Treaty (IWT), a landmark water-sharing agreement brokered in the postcolonial era. This decision followed a deadly terrorist attack in Pahalgam, allegedly orchestrated by Pakistan-based actors. India's suspension marked a dramatic rupture in a long-standing framework of hydro politics. (Hindu, 2025)

This shift reflects deeper structural patterns across the Global South, particularly in regions where colonial-era agreements, underdeveloped institutions, and asymmetrical power dynamics render treaty frameworks fragile under modern strategic pressures. Widely condemned by Pakistan as an "act of war," this unprecedented move signals a decisive break from the cooperative, rules-based framework that had governed the Indus Basin since 1960

(Banerji & Sitaraman, 2025). By asserting its upstream advantage to utilise its share of the Indus waters fully, India has effectively reconfigured its water diplomacy, adopting a coercive posture aimed at exerting geopolitical leverage.

The implications of this policy shift are profound and extend beyond South Asia. As climate change accelerates glacial melt and disrupts monsoon cycles, countries in the Global South, many of which depend on fragile, colonial-era water agreements, face heightened risks of treaty breakdown, resource insecurity, and conflict. The erosion of the IWT thus serves as a cautionary case study, raising urgent questions about the viability of cooperative water regimes and the future of regional diplomacy in an era where water is no longer merely a shared resource, but a strategic asset.

Background

The Indus Water Treaty (IWT), signed in 1960 between India and Pakistan with the facilitation of the World Bank, stands as a landmark agreement in the field of transboundary water governance. Emerging from the colonial legacy of partition and the immediate post-1947 water crisis, it institutionalised one of the earliest cooperative water-sharing mechanisms in the Global South (Mateen, 2025). Partition disrupted the integrated Indus River system, leading to immediate tensions. In 1948, India unilaterally halted canal waters to Pakistan, exposing the infrastructural and geopolitical vulnerabilities of newly independent states.

The IWT was the outcome of nearly a decade of negotiations, shaped by postcolonial concerns such as sovereignty, nation-building, and food security, alongside the pressing developmental needs of two young countries (1952–1960) (Khan, Faheem , & Marwat , 2025). The World Bank reframed water as a technical and developmental issue rather than purely political, facilitating compromise. Policymakers and observers saw it as a "powder keg waiting to explode," and the deal aimed to defuse it by giving millions of people who depended on agriculture and livelihoods institutional access to essential river resources (Alam, 2002).

After surviving three significant conflicts (1965, 1971, and 1999) and times of intense political tension between the signatories, the IWT has been hailed as one of the most resilient transboundary water accords over the years (Khan, Faheem , & Marwat , 2025). Its tenacity has frequently been praised as an uncommon illustration of ongoing bilateral collaboration in a precarious geopolitical environment. The IWT served as a model of treaty-based water governance for the Global South, highlighting the ability of institutional structures to manage tense interstate relations.

Yet, disputes persisted. Pakistan has repeatedly objected to India's hydroelectric infrastructure projects on western rivers, such as the Wullar Barrage, Kishanganga Project, and Baglihar Dam (Ahmad, 2011). It argues these threaten downstream flows, agriculture, and even its strategic depth. India maintains compliance with the treaty's "permissible uses". These technical disputes became entangled in political hostility, rendering institutional resolution cumbersome and often ineffective.

In addition to these difficulties, the Indus Basin's hydrological uncertainty is being exacerbated by the changing forces of climate change, glacier retreat, and monsoonal unpredictability. These changes highlight how a strictly bilateral legal framework from the middle of the 20th century is inadequate to handle the multi-scalar water risks of today. The evolution of the IWT presents important implications for the Global South, where many governments function under comparable postcolonial treaty frameworks despite uneven power relations and common ecological vulnerabilities.

Even well-established legal frameworks can fall apart when they are strategically repurposed and securitised, as seen by India's 2025 suspension of the IWT. The wider takeaway for the Global South is unmistakable: transboundary water agreements' strength rests not only on their legality but also on ongoing political will, fair resource distribution, and flexible governance frameworks that can adapt to changing geopolitical and environmental conditions.

The 2025 Suspension: Trigger and Policy Shift

Following India's unilateral suspension of participation in 2025, the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), which had long been praised as an example of transboundary water cooperation in the Global South, was plunged into crisis. The direct cause was a terrorist attack that killed 26 tourists in the Pahalgam Valley of Indian-administered Kashmir on April 22, 2025 (Banerji & Sitaraman, 2025). Responsibility was claimed by the Resistance Front, which is associated with the Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistan-based militant organisation designated as a terrorist group by the UN. India's response to the attack, which it said was state-sponsored, was a series of diplomatic and strategic actions, including the suspension of the IWT, the expulsion of Pakistani nationals, the downgrading of diplomatic relations, and the suspension of cross-border cultural and sporting events. The use of the term "blood and water cannot flow together" by Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested the securitisation of water as a tool of geopolitical reprisal (Banerji & Sitaraman, 2025).

A paradigm shift in India's hydro political posture, this weaponisation of water reflects a larger trend in the Global South where upstream riparians are more likely to exercise coercive domination over shared water resources in the face of perceived threats. In response, Pakistan called the suspension an "act of war," rekindling concerns about a water battle between two neighbours with nuclear weapons.

The suspension is legally contested. The IWT expressly declares that the treaty will continue in effect until it is superseded by mutual agreement; it makes no mention of unilateral suspension (BANK, 1960). Legal scholars, therefore, view India's decision to put the treaty "in abeyance" as a breach of international law (Banerji & Sitaraman, 2025) and as an assertion of upper riparian absolutism, echoing the now-discredited Harmon Doctrine. Put simply, India is accused of exercising unilateral control as the upstream power, undermining cooperative governance (Rossi, 2020).

Regionally, it sets a precedent for other players from the Global South, including China, which has hydro-hegemonic control over transboundary rivers like the Brahmaputra. There are urgent concerns regarding the resilience of postcolonial legal frameworks under geopolitical pressure as India attempts to change the normative boundaries of treaty-based governance in the Global South by citing national security and sovereignty.

The Rise of Hydro-Hegemony

Wider conflicts in transboundary water governance in the Global South are reflected in the Indus Waters Treaty's (IWT) conversion from a cooperative diplomacy paradigm to a hydro-political coercive instrument. The IWT, which has been commended for enduring numerous India-Pakistan hostilities since its founding in 1960, is currently under stress due to securitised narratives and punitive tactics. Beyond overt political disputes, coercion manifests in opaque project planning and data denial. For example, although the IWT mandates data-sharing, Pakistan has long accused India of withholding crucial details and concealing timelines for hydroelectric projects on the western rivers (e.g., Baglihar, Kishanganga, and Wullar Barrage). Such disputes have escalated into legal battles, with Pakistan engaging international law to seek World Bank arbitration.

This course exemplifies a more general trend of hydro-hegemony, in which powerful riparian nations enhance their control over shared river systems, frequently at the expense of cooperative governance. The securitisation of water in other Global South regions is comparable to India's claim of upstream control. Tensions between Egypt and Sudan have

increased due to Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile in East Africa (Mateen, 2025). Upstream nations in Southeast Asia have prioritised national development over the overall ecological health of the Mekong River. With approximately 40 transboundary rivers originating within its boundaries, China has become a powerful hydro-hegemon in South Asia (Banerji & Sitaraman, 2025). Both India and Bangladesh are concerned about the long-term effects on regional water security resulting from China's refusal to participate in water-sharing agreements and its ongoing dam construction on the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra). Competitive damming is gaining popularity in the region, as evidenced by India's dam development on the Siang River, a tributary of the Brahmaputra.

Afghanistan's ambitions to use the Kabul River, another important tributary of the Indus, for irrigation and hydropower projects are adding to Pakistan's concerns (Michel, 2020). These instances highlight the vulnerability of treaty-based governance structures in the Global South as climate variability increases and freshwater scarcity worsens. This trend aligns with a broader phenomenon of hydro-hegemony, where stronger riparian states consolidate control at the expense of cooperation, thereby exacerbating geopolitical tensions and developmental inequities.

Implications for Global South Water Governance under Climate Stress

The broader vulnerability of postcolonial legal systems overseeing transboundary resources in the Global South is mirrored in the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). The IWT, negotiated under Cold War pressures and the colonial-era “hydrological logic” of dividing rivers by geography rather than ecology, was never designed for today’s climate stresses. Its framework overlooked groundwater sharing, environmental safeguards, and ecological adaptation, leaving signatories unprepared for challenges like glacial melt, erratic monsoons, droughts, and floods. Pakistan’s vulnerability as a downstream state has intensified under India’s upstream dam-building and the 2019 repeal of Article 370, which further empowered New Delhi’s control over Jammu & Kashmir’s waters.

Crucially, the legal framework of the IWT, which was based on presumptions from the middle of the 20th century, was unable to foresee modern climatic hazards, including rapid glacial melt, unpredictable monsoons, and severe droughts or floods. (Babar, Waleed, & Younas, 2024). Serious flaws that are now present in many Global South water-sharing frameworks are shown by the lack of measures for groundwater sharing, environmental protection, and animal adaptation. Three pillars are needed to reimagine water diplomacy for the Global South:

stronger third-party mediation (Bisht, 2025), inclusive and transparent data-sharing mechanisms (such as regional hydrological databases), and a treaty architecture that is climate resilient. Asymmetrical power dynamics and political development initiatives frequently make bilateral approaches ineffective.

Despite being intended as platforms for South Asian collaboration, regional organisations such as SAARC have mainly stagnated in the field of water diplomacy. Regional organisations such as SAARC, ASEAN, and the African Union possess untapped potential to coordinate basin-wide climate-water governance, but remain underutilised. (Babar, Waleed, & Younas, 2024) Multilateral organisations, like as the World Bank, which mediated the IWT in the first place, should take the initiative to finance basin-wide resilience initiatives in addition to resolving disputes. The 1997 UN Watercourses Convention codifies key principles—such as prior notification and equitable use—that should guide future transboundary agreements. Yet, many Global South states have not ratified it, undermining its reach (Banerji & Sitaraman, 2025).

Conclusion

The Global South is at a pivotal moment as shared river systems turn into geopolitical hotspots. Under current geopolitical and climatic stress, this transition from cooperative treaty-based administration to coercive, securitised hydro-diplomacy highlights the vulnerability of postcolonial legal systems. The disintegration of the IWT demonstrates the inadequacy of the mid-20th-century frameworks in handling the multi-scalar problems of today, such as asymmetric power dynamics, water weaponisation, and growing climate concerns. Countries in the Global South frequently negotiate water diplomacy amid unequal power structures and precarious internal circumstances, in contrast to the Global North, which has more robust legal norms, global organisations, and enforcement mechanisms. Water is now a strategic tool of statecraft rather than just a resource for development. In the absence of institutional reform, open data exchange, third-party mediation, and climate-resilient legal frameworks, transboundary water accords run the risk of becoming outdated and unfit to handle current or upcoming emergencies. Therefore, the collapse of the IWT represents a sobering case study and a pressing demand to rethink water diplomacy, based on justice, sustainability, and multilateralism, for a world that is conflict-prone and climate-stressed.

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