



Security Nexus Perspective

TERRORISM AND WATER WARS: INDIA-PAKISTAN ON THE BRINK OF A MAJOR CONFLAGRATION

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The brutal gunning down of 26 tourists on April 22, 2025, in the picturesque *Pahalgam* Valley in the Indian administered Union territory of Kashmir by terrorists has provoked a tough response from India.¹ The group—*Resistance Front*—an offshoot of the *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT)—a dreaded terror outfit based in Pakistan—has claimed credit for the attacks.² Immediately, the Indian government, citing the alleged support for cross-border terrorism, announced a series of punitive diplomatic measures against Pakistan.

¹ Fayaz Bukhari, “At least 20 feared killed in militant attack on tourists in Indian Kashmir, security sources say,” *Reuters*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/one-killed-seven-injured-militant-attack-indias-kashmir-india-today-tv-says-2025-04-22/>

² Bharti Jain, “TRF only a smokescreen, Lashkar emerges as key suspect in Valley attack,” *Times of India*, April 24, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/trf-only-a-smokescreen-lashkar-emerges-as-key-suspect-in-valley-attack/articleshow/120564558.cms>

Response from India has been swift, which has included the suspension of participation in the Indus Waters Treaty, the closure of a key and the only land border (Attari-Wagah), the downgrading of diplomatic relations, the expulsion of Pakistani nationals, and the suspension of cultural and sports events. During a strident speech, the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, addressed the issue in both Hindi and English, underscoring a significant strategic shift in India's response posture. He said, "Today, from the soil of Bihar, I say this to the whole world, India will identify, trace, and punish every terrorist and their backers. We will pursue them to the ends of the Earth."³

Despite Pakistan's denial of any official involvement, Indian officials have indicated that there is strong indication of official support from Pakistan, and therefore launched diplomatic retaliatory actions. There is also active consideration of including military strikes, in line with India's stated zero-tolerance policy toward terrorism.⁴ This heightened rhetoric has increased concerns about the potential for military escalation between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. Pakistan, in turn, has said that the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), which has withstood the test of time and previous wars and clashes between both countries, is an "act of war."⁵ The article will focus on India's suspension of the Indus Water Treaty and its implications for bilateral relations and the rapidly emerging crisis in the South Asian region.⁶

Why is the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) Significant?

The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) is a transboundary water sharing treaty signed in 1960 between India and Pakistan.⁷ It is also the oldest enduring confidence-building measure (CBM) between India and Pakistan. Brokered by the World Bank, the treaty divides the Indus River Basin between India and Pakistan, with India exercising control of the east-flowing rivers, namely Ravi, Sutlej, and Beas, and

³ TOI News Desk, "Pahalgam terror attack: PM Modi's rare English address in Bihar, 'end of the Earth' warning & message to the world," *Times of India*, April 24, 2025, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/120579115.cms>

⁴ TOI News Desk, "'Decide on targets, mode, timing': PM Modi gives complete freedom to forces to avenge Pahalgam," *Times of India*, April 29, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/decide-on-targets-mode-timing-pm-modi-gives-complete-freedom-to-forces-to-avenge-pahalgam/articleshow/120734353.cms>

⁵ Patrick Martin, "Pakistan warns India that changes to Indus Waters Treaty an 'act of war'," *Australian Broadcast Corporation (ABC)*, April 24, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-25/pakistan-warns-india-indus-water-treaty-changes-act-of-war/105214372>

⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, Statement of Foreign Secretary on the decision of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), April 23, 2025. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/39442/Statement by Foreign Secretary on the decision of the Cabinet Committee on Security _CCS](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/39442/Statement%20by%20Foreign%20Secretary%20on%20the%20decision%20of%20the%20Cabinet%20Committee%20on%20Security%20_CCS)

⁷ Government of India, *Indus Water Treaty*, September 19, 1960, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6439/Indus>

neighboring Pakistan exercising control over the western rivers, Jhelum, Chenab, and Indus.⁸ This water treaty is very valuable because it fulfills the irrigation needs of both India and Pakistan in varying measures. In India, it secures the irrigation needs of a section of farmers in the northern states of Punjab and Haryana, while in Pakistan, the treaty supports the entire agrarian economy of the country.⁹

The treaty is also significant because it has remained a key tool of conflict resolution between India and Pakistan, especially during times of conflict between the two countries, and has withstood major wars (1965, 1971, and 1999) between the nuclear-armed neighbors. The treaty is also relevant because it has a built-in conflict resolution mechanism, which usually enables a neutral expert or international court of arbitration to settle disputes between the two parties.¹⁰

Broader Implications Flowing from the Suspension of the Treaty

India's decision to hold the treaty "in abeyance" is a direct response to the recent terrorist attacks that occurred in *Pahalgam* in the Indian administered Kashmir. The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, had famously said, "blood and water cannot flow together," after the Uri terror attacks in 2016.¹¹ Another Indian minister made a similar statement in 2019 after the *Pulwama* terror attacks as well.¹² Corresponding rhetoric has also flown from the Pakistani side, with Pakistan accusing India of "water terrorism" after the construction of a dam on the Ravi River in 2024.¹³ The Pakistani

⁸ The World Bank, *Fact Sheet: The Indus Waters Treaty 1960 and the Role of the World Bank*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/brief/fact-sheet-the-indus-waters-treaty-1960-and-the-world-bank>

⁹ Arshad Mehmood, "Pakistan warns of war as India suspends water treaty, closes border," *The Jerusalem Post*, April 25, 2025, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-851475>

¹⁰ Anuttama Banerji, "A Shared Interest: Why India and Pakistan Should Strengthen the Indus Waters Treaty", *Stimson Center*, June 27, 2024. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/a-shared-interest-why-india-and-pakistan-should-strengthen-the-indus-waters-treaty/>

¹¹ Indian Express, "Blood and water cannot flow together: PM Modi at Indus Water Treaty meeting," September 27, 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/indus-water-treaty-blood-and-water-cant-flow-together-pm-modi-pakistan-uri-attack/>

¹² Nitin Gadkari, *Twitter*, February 21, 2019, https://x.com/nitin_gadkari/status/1098567044574916608

¹³ Economic Times, "Water Terrorism: Pak media on India completely stopping flow of Ravi river into Pakistan," February 27, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/water-terrorism-pak-media-on-india-completely-stopping-flow-of-ravi-river-into-pakistan/articleshow/108030562.cms?from=mdr>

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government has responded in a similar tone on this occasion as well, terming India's abeyance of the water treaty as an "act of war."¹⁴

The impact of the actual suspension of the treaty is grave. It will deprive Pakistan's 240 million people of access to water, as Pakistan is a lower riparian state. This decision will also affect India, inflicting logistical and infrastructural costs. For example, the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab rivers account for eighty percent of the Indus basin's flow. However, "stopping the waters" of the Indus and Chenab is impractical as these rivers flow through steep, narrow gorges in the India-administered Jammu and Kashmir that severely restrict India's ability to construct large reservoirs. As far as the Jhelum is concerned, creating a reservoir will cause large-scale inundation of the populated areas, damaging critical infrastructure.¹⁵

The Indus Water Treaty has allowed India to demonstrate its long-term commitment to international conventions and norms, while also giving it the opportunity to use the provisions of the treaty to maximize its benefits.¹⁶ Keeping the treaty "in abeyance" is a near-term measure to "coerce" Pakistan to stop sponsoring terrorist activities. However, the decision will likely have other political ramifications, especially for India-China water relations. The upper riparian state, in this case China, is the "hydro-hegemon of the region."¹⁷ China has not been sharing hydrological data with the lower riparian state, especially India, since 2017, after the Doklam border standoff with India.¹⁸ In this regard, China's proposed dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo River/Brahmaputra has also acquired significant attention as it could be potentially used as a "water bomb" against India and lower

¹⁴ The Dawn, "India's worn-out narrative': Full text of statement on NSC's decisions," April 24, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906310/indias-worn-out-narrative-full-text-of-statement-on-nscs-decisions>

¹⁵ Swarajya, "Indus Water Treaty: Why India Can't Weaponise Water Against Pakistan Yet," April 25, 2025. <https://swarajyamag.com/defence/indus-waters-treaty-why-india-cant-weaponise-water-against-pakistan-yet>

¹⁶ Devirupa Mitra, "Not looking to Abrogate Indus Water Treaty But India Wants to 'Maximize' Exploitation," *The Wire*, September 26, 2016, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/indus-water-treaty>

¹⁷ China is the "hydrohegemon" as 40 Transboundary Rivers originate in China. For more information see: Lei Xie and Jia Shaofeng, *China's International Transboundary Rivers Politics, Security and Diplomacy of Shared Water Resources*, Routledge, New York, 2018; Genevieve Donnellon May, "Hydro-hegemon? Complexities of shared rivers between China and India," *Lowy Institute*, May 9, 2023. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/hydro-hegemon-complexities-shared-rivers-between-china-india>

¹⁸ Press Trust of India (PTI), "No hydrological data from China in 2017, India monitoring water flow in trans-border rivers," *Financial Express*, March 14 2018. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/no-hydrological-data-from-china-in-2017-india-monitoring-water-flow-in-trasns-border-rivers/articleshow/63302476.cms?from=mdr>

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riparian countries.¹⁹ India has responded by conducting damming activities on the Siang River in Arunachal Pradesh.²⁰ Such competitive damming activities point to the growing potential for enduring conflict over water in the future in South Asia.

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¹⁹ The Hindu, “China’s mega dam will be ‘water bomb’: Arunachal MP,” *The Hindu*, April 8, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/chinas-mega-dam-will-be-water-bomb-arunachal-mp/article69426788.ece>

²⁰ Money Control, “China to build ‘world’s largest dam’ in Tibet: What is India’s answer to it?” January 8, 2025, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/india/china-to-build-world-s-largest-dam-in-tibet-what-is-india-s-answer-to-it-12905682.html>

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