

Won't The Suspension Of The Indus Water Treaty Backfire On India?

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Abstract

The Indus Water Treaty (IWT), signed in 1960 between India and Pakistan with the mediation of the World Bank, has long been hailed as one of the most successful international water-sharing agreements. It has endured multiple wars and political upheavals between the two nations. However, with rising tensions and repeated instances of cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan, India has hinted at suspending the treaty as a retaliatory step. This article evaluates whether such a move could potentially backfire on India and lead to an escalation in cross-border terrorism.

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I. Recent Incident

A recent terrorist attack in **Pahalgam**, a prominent tourist destination in Jammu and Kashmir, resulted in the deaths of **26 Indian civilians**. The attack, traced back to elements across the border in Pakistan, has triggered global outrage. In response, the Indian government has proposed several measures to curb such threats, including the suspension of the Indus Water Treaty. This decision, has been perceived by many international observers as a provocative act that could be interpreted as a **step toward war**, possibly escalating terrorism in the region.

The Indus Water Treaty: A Brief Overview

The **Indus Water Treaty**, brokered by the **World Bank in 1960**, is one of the most enduring water-sharing agreements in history. Signed between **India and Pakistan**, the treaty governs the usage of the waters from six rivers of the **Indus River System** — a lifeline for millions in both countries. According to the agreement:

Eastern Rivers: Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej were allocated to **India**.

Western Rivers: Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab were given to **Pakistan**, with India allowed limited use for irrigation, domestic, and non-consumptive purposes (Gleick, 1993).

Despite multiple wars and skirmishes, the treaty has stood firm for over six decades, largely seen as a symbol of cooperation amid conflict. However, the recent **Pahalgam attack** may push India to **reconsider its obligations under the treaty**, especially given Pakistan's alleged support to militant groups operating across the border.

But, how significant is this treaty being discussed above? And, what place does it hold in the columns of history that lets it enter the forums of international discussion, every now and then?

II. Historical Significance: From The Indus Valley Civilization To Today

The roots of this water system trace back to one of the world's earliest urban cultures — the **Indus Valley Civilization** (c. 2600–1900 BCE). Flourishing around the **Indus River and its tributaries**, this ancient civilization was known for its advanced urban planning, drainage systems, and agriculture dependent on river waters. Significant locations such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro served as evidence of a civilization closely connected to its riverine environment. (Ghosh, 2019).

Today, the same rivers that once nourished a great civilization are entangled in geopolitical disputes, with water turning from a source of life to a potential instrument of leverage and conflict (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

III. Eastern Vs. Western Rivers: Strategic Implications

The treaty's division of rivers into **Eastern (India-controlled)** and **Western (Pakistan-controlled)** streams holds critical strategic implications. India, regarded as the upper riparian state, holds authority over the **headwaters** of these rivers. While it has largely abided by the treaty's terms, experts argue that India holds **diplomatic and ecological leverage** it could exercise if cross-border hostility continues.

By suspending or altering its commitment to the treaty, one can deduce the following:

- India is likely to **redirect water from the western rivers**, posing impact Pakistan's irrigation and hydropower systems.
- Such a move might be viewed internationally as **provocative**, possibly escalating tensions.
- Conversely, India argues that **Pakistan's tacit support for terrorism** undermines the spirit of peaceful cooperation that the treaty symbolizes.

In order to understand such claims, one should have an idea of the nitty-gritties of the word 'terrorism'. Let's understand in detail.

IV. What Is Terrorism?

According to philosopher C. A. J. Coady (2004), terrorism is defined as:

"The organized use of violence to attack non-combatants ('innocents' in a special sense) or their property for political purposes."

Terrorism is not merely an act but an ideology—one that compromises humanity by sacrificing innocent lives for political gain. Therefore, fighting terrorism involves **eliminating its root causes**, not just neutralizing individual terrorists (Kapoor, 2023).

V. Causes Of Terrorism

As per Gleditsch & Hegre (2001), Terrorism arises due to a complex interplay of socio-political and economic factors. Key causes include:

- **Political Grievances:** Lack of representation, oppression, authoritarian regimes, and foreign occupation.
- **Religious and Ideological Extremism:** Radical or distorted interpretations of religious or political ideologies.
- **Economic Hardship:** Poverty, unemployment, and economic disparity increase susceptibility to extremist recruitment.
- **Social Inequality:** Marginalization based on religion, caste, or ethnicity often leads to resentment.
- **Historical Injustices:** Real or perceived injustices are often exploited by extremist groups.
- **Psychological Motivations:** Feelings of alienation, revenge, or humiliation.
- **Foreign Military Interventions:** These often radicalize local populations and destabilize regions.
- **Weak Governance:** Corrupt or failed states create a power vacuum that extremist groups exploit.
- **Propaganda and Social Media:** Technology enables the rapid spread of radical ideologies.

VI. Does Pakistan Sponsor Terrorism And What Should Be The Recommendations?

Several factors have contributed to Pakistan's history of supporting terrorism against India, particularly in Kashmir:

- **State-Sponsored Terrorism:** Groups such as LeT, JeM, and Hizbul Mujahideen have historically received training, funding, and shelter from elements within Pakistan's military and intelligence services, particularly the ISI.
- **Religious Extremism:** Radical Islamist ideologies are used to justify attacks under the guise of "liberating" Kashmir (Gleditsch & Hegre, 2001).
- **Proxy War Strategy:** After conventional military defeats in 1947–48, 1965, 1971, and the 1999 Kargil conflict, Pakistan shifted to a proxy war strategy using non-state actors to destabilize Kashmir.
- **Manipulated Insurgency:** What began as a local movement in 1989 was soon hijacked by Pakistan-based terror outfits, turning a political issue into a violent, radicalized conflict.

VII. What Does The Indus Water Treaty Mean For Pakistan?

Under the 1960 Treaty, Pakistan was given control over the **western rivers**—Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab—amounting to an annual flow of around **99 billion cubic meters**, or about **70% of the total water shared** between the two nations (Ghosh, 2019). The possible outcomes of halting the Treaty for Pakistan involve:

- Loss of water for over **80% of its agriculture**.
- Reduced **hydropower output by one-third**.
- A sharp decline in **GDP and food security**, leading to widespread socio-economic instability (World Bank, 1960).

VIII. Could Suspending The Treaty Fuel More Terrorism?

Based on historical and socio-economic indicators, there is a **real possibility**—perhaps a **50% chance**—that suspending the Indus Water Treaty could intensify cross-border terrorism.

Consider the following scenario: A farming family in rural Pakistan, entirely dependent on irrigation from rivers governed by the Treaty, loses its livelihood due to a lack of water. Drought and famine set in. If a

child witnesses his family suffer or perish due to these conditions, it could instil deep resentment and a thirst for revenge (United Nations, 2022). Over time, such individuals may be radicalized, especially in a politically unstable environment (Gleick, 1993).

Thus, **water scarcity and agricultural collapse**, combined with economic distress, could create fertile ground for extremist recruitment, potentially leading to the **emergence of new terror groups** targeting India.

IX. Conclusion

The Indus Water Treaty has served for over six decades as a symbol of cooperation amidst deep-seated hostility. While India's concerns regarding terrorism are legitimate, using water as a tool of retaliation is fraught with risk. It could provoke **international criticism, humanitarian crises in Pakistan**, and a **new wave of terrorism** fuelled by desperation and vengeance (Riedel, 2008).

There is a real possibility—perhaps a **50% probability**—that this approach could backfire. As a young citizen, I urge the Government to weigh the **long-term strategic and humanitarian consequences** of suspending the Treaty. The question remains:

Will the Government proceed with the suspension, knowing the risks it may unleash?

The path to peace lies not in escalation, but in **diplomacy, regional cooperation, intelligence sharing**, and **targeted counterterrorism efforts**—not in weaponizing the lifeblood of millions.

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