افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مبـــاد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مــباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages	زبانهای اروپائی

Abbas Al-Zein

26.05.2025

The hidden battle: India's water war against Pakistan

New Delhi's escalation over the Indus River isn't just environmental – it's strategic, existential, and signals a new front in the war of attrition with Islamabad.

Photo Credit: The Cradle

The crisis between India and Pakistan is no longer limited to missiles or Kashmir skirmishes. Today, control over the Indus River system marks a new battlefield in South Asia's evolving struggle for power.

After April's deadly attack in Indian-occupied Kashmir left 26 dead, New Delhi suspended its participation in the Indus Waters Treaty. Prime Minister Narendra Modi instructed his government to speed up dam-building on the Chenab, Jhelum, and Indus – rivers critical to Pakistan's agriculture and economy. Modi's declaration that "Pakistan will not get a single drop of water that belongs to India," wasn't rhetoric – it was policy.

Though a ceasefire went into effect on 10 May, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar made it clear that India would not recommit to the treaty until Pakistan took decisive action against cross-border militancy.

Simultaneously, India accelerated large-scale water infrastructure in the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region and halted the exchange of vital hydrological data – actions that dramatically increased the risk of sudden flooding in Pakistani territory. Islamabad responded by calling the treaty's suspension "an act of war."

When rivers become weapons

This aggressive shift marked a turning point in the weaponization of natural resources across the subcontinent. The precedent it sets not only undermines decades of water diplomacy but signals a dangerous new mode of confrontation between two nuclear-armed states.

This is not the first time water has been politicized in the subcontinent. After the 2016 Uri attack, Modi warned that "blood and water cannot flow together" – a line he revived in the current crisis. In 2019, after the Pulwama bombing, India's water minister announced a halt to the flow of eastern rivers into Pakistan. Yet the planned termination of the treaty in 2025 marks an unprecedented escalation from rhetoric to reality.

The Indus Waters Treaty, brokered by the World Bank in 1960, divided control of six rivers between upstream India and downstream Pakistan. The Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej were allocated to India, while the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab were reserved for Pakistan. Despite wars, coups, and political upheaval, the treaty endured as a symbol of minimal cooperation between hostile nuclear states.

That fragile balance began to unravel in the early 2000s when India launched several hydropower projects on the western rivers. The Baglihar Dam was completed in 2008, followed by the Kishanganga project in 2018. Both projects sparked legal disputes, but international arbitration failed to curb India's dam ambitions. The illegal filling of Baglihar caused severe water shortages in Pakistan, while the Kishanganga conflict became emblematic of New Delhi's aggressive water posture.

India's attempt to divert the Chenab through the Ranbir Canal was another red flag. Delhi framed these moves as domestic necessities – needed to meet local demands in Jammu, Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh. But Islamabad sees them as an existential threat. In Pakistan's eyes, India is no longer abiding by treaty terms; it is unilaterally rewriting them.

India's evolving hydro-politics now represents not only a breach of legal commitments but a direct challenge to Pakistan's sovereignty and food security.

A system on the brink

Over 80 percent of Pakistan's agricultural land relies on the western rivers. The Indus alone sustains more than 20 percent of GDP and supports the livelihoods of nearly 68 percent of rural Pakistanis. Any disruption in flow devastates harvests, inflates food prices, and erodes rural employment.

Punjab, Pakistan's breadbasket, is most vulnerable. Following India's treaty suspension, some hydrological stations in Pakistan reported river level drops of up to 90 percent. Such shocks ripple across the economy, threatening food security and social cohesion.

The collapse of rural livelihoods will deepen economic dependency and social fragmentation – fertile ground for unrest.

The consequences extend beyond agriculture. As water dries up, rural populations migrate en masse to overcrowded cities. Pakistan's already strained infrastructure buckles under the weight of displaced communities and shrinking resources.

The climate crisis compounds the political one. Melting Himalayan glaciers – primary sources of the Indus basin – are accelerating water cycles of excess and scarcity. Erratic rainfall and flooding alternate with prolonged droughts. Storage systems designed for a stable past can no longer cope with the volatile present.

Water isn't just a resource anymore. It's a trigger.

Climate unpredictability gives India even more leverage – each dam and reservoir is now a potential flashpoint.

India's doctrine of pressure

India's shift isn't limited to engineering, it's strategic. Rajesh Rajagopalan, in his 2016 analysis, described a move from "massive retaliation" to "gradual deterrence" – a doctrine of sustained, non-military coercion. India's use of water fits this model: controlling river flows to pressure Pakistan while avoiding direct, hot war.

This gradual strategy bypasses traditional deterrents. Since the 1998 nuclear tests, both nations have relied on mutually assured destruction to prevent escalation. But water pressure sidesteps that logic. It destabilizes without triggering alarms. The floodgate becomes a weapon.

It is a form of statecraft that undermines without alerting, bleeds without blasting. Delhi no longer needs tanks or missiles to inflict damage. A dam valve will do.

What began as an India-Pakistan issue is now part of a broader strategic equation. China – Pakistan's closest ally – controls the Brahmaputra's source in Tibet. Should tensions rise, Beijing could use this leverage to disrupt flows into northeast India.

The emergence of multi-vector “water deterrence” means the next South Asian war may begin not with gunfire, but with a closed sluice gate.

Hydrological warfare is no longer hypothetical. It’s happening. And India’s example may inspire others. In a region already destabilized by border disputes and economic inequality, the weaponization of water marks a new and dangerous phase.

The Indus basin, once a symbol of improbable cooperation, is becoming the epicenter of South Asia’s next great conflict.

MAY 25, 2025