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Can the Indus Water Treaty Defeat Terrorism?

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Weaponizing the Indus Water Treaty will undermine the efforts to help South Asia overcome its flawed & troubled colonial resource and river control legacies. Recovering the idea of the ecological river and developing the notion of flows as natural endowments is crucial for a climate impacted region.

In the estimate of the popular mood in India, *Operation Sindoor* was a resounding success, despite some losses. Accordingly, most, if not all, 'objectives' were handsomely met in a four-day blitzkrieg of aerial bombing, systematic targeting, drone strikes and an unrelenting info-war on cable TV and social media.

This 'robust' military response of the Indian government to state sponsored cross-border terrorism, however, rests on an uncomplicated assumption: that the enemy only listens when given a ferocious dose of pain and fear. Of course, there are contrary views, as there should be in a nation of 1.4 billion people. It has been pointed out, for example, that since the only business of the terrorist is death, can you really scare them with more deaths?

If a revenge version of the doctrine of shock and awe does not prevent cross-border terror, will weaponizing the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) be a better bet? The IWT, it bears remembering, was a momentous river sharing agreement signed in 1960 between India and Pakistan with the World Bank playing the role of an honest broker. The Treaty was unprecedented in not only categorizing the Indus system as comprising a collection of national rivers but also divisible into two 'national' halves. While the use of the Western rivers (Chenab, Jhelum and the Indus) were awarded to Pakistan, the waters of the Eastern flows (Sutlej, Beas and the Ravi) were assigned to India. These flows were now to be regulated with provisions, laws, rules, articles and even mechanisms to arbitrate likely disputes. In the post-colonial dispensation, the Indus and its tributaries were thus principally valued for their role in nation-making rather than viewed as geological forces, critical to sustaining varied environments within the basin.

In this new imagining built around the idea of the national river, India becomes the upper riparian. But within the same reckoning, on her eastern flank, India is now the lower riparian to China and becomes the middle-riparian in the section where the muscular flows of the *Brahmaputra* unravel between the *Tsangpo gorge* and deltaic Bangladesh. Nation-making has thus inescapably turned all South Asia into a checkered political waterscape and therefore what happens on the Indus cannot stay on the Indus (Yadav 2025).

Weaponizing Rivers?

But how and who got it into their heads that the IWT could be weaponized? Some observers trace the moment to September 2016 when four heavily armed men of the *Jaish-e-Mohammed* slipped into the headquarters of an Indian army brigade that was stationed near Uri, a town which lies in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. In the subsequent pre-dawn fire fight, 17 Indian security personnel were killed with close to twice the number being gravely injured. Amidst the intense anger and under pressure to act, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose the Uri attack to make what was clearly a calculated remark that 'blood and water can't flow at the same time.' Implying, in the unambiguous metaphor that the IWT was now an active ingredient in an evolving counter-terror strategy.

The Modi government's brinkmanship over the IWT was quick to also tap into an already existing disquiet. Over the years, numerous Indian security analysts and regional strategists had been loudly declaring in many fora that India had been served up short by the 1960 Treaty. In the opinion of the hawkish Indian political analyst and columnist Brahma Chellaney (2011; p 77), the IWT was unacceptable as 'No other water-sharing treaty in modern world history matches this level of generosity on the part of the upper-riparian state [India] for the lower-riparian one [Pakistan].'[1] The regional expert Uttam Sinha likened the IWT in 2019 to being an 'albatross' around India's neck as it remains unfairly 'tied to … provisions that were laid down in 1950.' In contrast, the late Ramaswamy Iyer, one time secretary to the Government of India and a leading water expert in his time, stoutly defended the IWT by terming it a relatively successful legal-technical arrangement which also 'possessed in-built mechanisms' for resolving conflicts. And whatever vulnerabilities did trouble the treaty, he averred, drew mostly from the continued build-up of misperceptions and political distrust between the governments of Pakistan and India (Iyer 2013). Put differently, it was the politics rather than the IWT that needed to be fixed.

Environmental Historians and Rivers

In contrast to the huffing and puffing over contemporary geopolitical anxiety, environmental historians (the new kids on the block) have put forward a very different understanding. Daniel Haines in *Rivers Divided* argued that India and Pakistan worried most about stabilizing territorial claims within the freshly drawn political borders, following their respective independence from British colonial rule in 1947. While India drew upon the notion of 'absolute sovereignty', implying that all rivers flowing within its territory became exclusively Indian flows. Pakistan argued for the principle of 'prior appropriation', meaning that the past usage of the Indus waters for their canal networks entitled them to have prior claims over the rivers. That is, Pakistan sought to privilege history while India believed that rights flowed from geography. The Indus rivers, in other words, were always going to be haunted by the new geopolitical tensions that were freshly unleashed by decolonization and nation-making (Haines 2017).

David Gilmartin's *Blood and Water* (2015), in a detailed study of the Indus basin reminds us that the region prior to the 19th century was, in fact, thickly peopled by nomadic, transhumant and pastoral tribes, who seasonally migrated between the surrounding hills and the interfluves (*bars*). It was only following the consolidation of British rule, that the basin got re-imagined as a howling desert that required large scale irrigation engineering projects. The vast semi-arid flood plains ? sandwiched between the Indus and Gangetic River systems ? were consequently turned into settled agricultural zones. Beginning with the Upper Bari Doab Canal (1859) and the Sirhind system (1882), the colonial irrigation drive climaxed with its 'most ambitious' irrigation project ? the Triple Canal Project (1916).

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By the early decades of the 20th century, the Indus system was one of most engineered geographies in the world, with a massive grid of channels, diversion structures, dams, weirs and drainage lines. A once heterogeneous collection of people and places had, in effect, been radically transformed through imperial science, hydraulic technologies, cement and quantitative hydrology into a smoothened landscape dominated by landed property and settled commercial agriculture. Put simply, before the Indus River system was turned into national entities, the flows had been organized as a 'colonial resource regime'[2], which in the main involved damming and controlling the rivers through a vast artificial network of canals. Unsurprisingly, when the Radcliffe Line announced a hard border between India and Pakistan in August of 1947, the complex web of interconnected flows was unravelled and disarticulated. In the newly created political boundaries, it became the case that several diversion structures, regulators and dams fell on different sides of the border from the canals they had previously diverted waters into.

To contain the sudden eruption of a crisis over water amidst the pell-mell of 'partition' — the brutal violence that erupted following the large-scale shuffling of people between India and Pakistan — both sides quickly settled on what was called a 'Standstill Agreement,' which was to maintain all existing flows till 31st March 1948. The Agreement, however, failed its first test when on the day it lapsed (April 1st, 1949) the then incipient government of India with great alacrity 'suspended' all supplies. Though flows were eventually restored after 18 'long days', Pakistan had been indelibly 'seared' by the shock (Mustafa 2011).

While the division of the Indus system into national rivers not only instantly ignited fresh disputes, colonial engineering legacies and the emerging politics of decolonization further undermined the region's complex hydrology. In the words of the brilliant Pakistani geographer Majed Akhter (2010), the newly minted countries particularly ignored the 'hydrological bonds' or 'hydrologic interconnectivity' between the various tributaries and within the basin region. Governments, in other words, even as they fought over the quantity of waters remained blind to viewing the rivers as qualitative ecological processes.

River Ecology Emerges

From the 1980s, the belief that rivers are merely moving masses of water has, in fact, been conceptually challenged. In the changed framework, rivers are more carefully studied as geomorphologic, chemical and biological processes that are made up of a rich mosaic of habitats which make aquatic life possible. It is now widely understood that variable flows create and maintain a range of ecological relationships between the channel, floodplain, wetland and the estuary. Wetlands, moreover, are important nursery grounds for fish and provide habitats for various kinds of flora and fauna. The Indus basin in such a reckoning can be thus more meaningfully grasped as a weave of ecological webs that entangle Pakistan and India within a single inter-connected environmental bloc rather than as nations divided by rivers (see Johnson et al 1995; Norris and Thomas 1999).

This shift in perspective which treats rivers as a 'natural endowment' brimming with ecological services instead of a 'natural resource' to be dammed and diverted becomes particularly significant in the contemporary context of global warming. As a natural endowment,

the Indus River system moreover is no longer limited to being a captive of the expertise of the engineer. Instead, it can now be assessed more broadly through a whole slew of different knowledges. That is, the river can be assembled as a multi-dimensional entity through conversations between biologists, ecologists, local histories, fishing groups, ichthyologists, farmers, irrigators and so on. In other words, the quantitative engineering vision gets decentered with an emphasis, in turn, on understanding the varied ecological and social qualities that makes up flows.

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Such a perspectival shift to an ecological river, moreover, acquires considerable significance in the contemporary context of global warming. Increasingly, there are growing alarms about climate uncertainties: receding glaciers and the palpable increase in extreme weather events such as heat waves, extraordinary flooding or intense droughts. In 2010, for example, Pakistan witnessed an unprecedented climate shock. Following the unusual halting of an entire jet stream over the western Himalayas sometime in July of that year an intense precipitation episode followed. Such was the intensity that four months of rainfall fell, by one estimate, in the span of a few days. The devastation brought on by the 'great floods' of 2010 proved to be mind boggling. In one survey, 21 million people were declared as having been impacted. Close to 1,700 people or more perished and 1.8 million homes were damaged or destroyed. In its wake, the floods also rummaged through 2.3 million hectares of standing crops and brought about a loss of $5 billion to the agriculture sector alone and another $4 billion to physical and social infrastructure (Mustafa and Wrathall 2011). In sum, climate change impacts in the very near future will not be trifling and are expected to engulf the entire basin region.

Climate Change and Infrastructures for Peace

The need and urgency to mitigate climate change impacts will demand basin level strategies such as technical coordination, social cooperation and the building of high levels of trust to develop and sustain resilience capacities. Close to 300 million people currently inhabit the Indus Basin region, which stretches across the countries of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and India. Of these, the major share of 47% and 39% of the populace are in Pakistan and India, respectively. To talk of weaponizing the IWT, therefore, is not only being entirely unmindful and irresponsible in the face of the broader basin wide threats that climate change impacts will bring, but it will also undermine the urgent efforts to speedily help South Asia overcome its flawed and troubled colonial resource and river control legacies. Recovering the idea of the ecological river and developing the notion of flows as natural endowments will, in fact, be crucial to how hopeful futures for a climate impacted region can be envisioned.

On the other hand, will creating a large-scale humanitarian crisis in Pakistan by abrogating the IWT or haphazardly scrambling flows stop terrorism? If the horrors inflicted on the people of Gaza by an arrogant Israeli government is any indication, the world at large rapidly loses sympathy for any state action that targets innocent women and children for crimes created by armed men. Instead, both countries have it within their means to turn the IWT into an 'infrastructure for peace'. That is, by reimagining the intricate river network as sources for resilience and cooperation across the Indus basin, constituencies for peace can be created. Is this sounding too idealistic and impractical? There is no magic bullet against terrorism and the only real meaningful strategy is to make violence politically unsustainable. If war is not a real option, then only peace is possible.

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Footnotes:

1 For a critique of Chellaney's book see D'Souza (2014).

2 For an interesting insight into the term colonial resource regime see the VOX video "The disastrous redesign of Pakistan's rivers" (s).

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