



Conflict Factsheet

Water Conflict in the Indus River Basin between India and Pakistan

Type of conflict Main	Intensity 1
Conflict Locality Southern Asia	Time 1947 –ongoing
Countries Pakistan, India	Resources Water



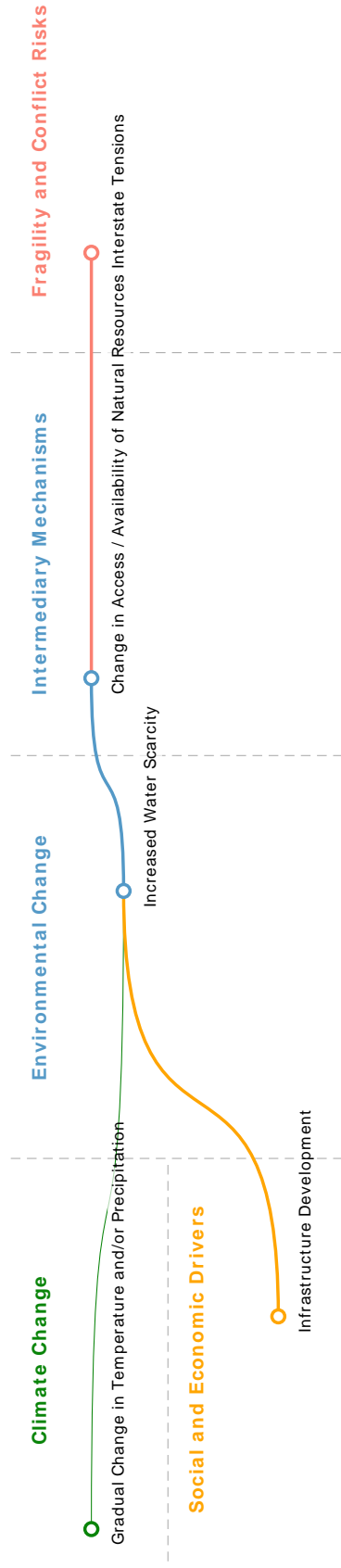
Transboundary
water
management

Conflict Summary

Climate change and transforming water usage patterns in the Indus river basin have placed increasing stress on the foundations of the Indus Water Treaty. This scenario is causing diplomatic tensions between the countries of India and Pakistan.



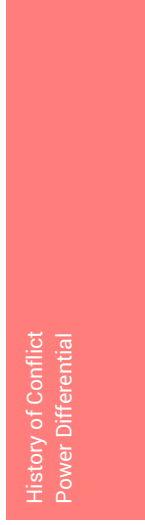
Conceptual Model



Context Factors



Water





Conflict History

For over a half century, rivalry over river resources has been a source of interstate tension between India and Pakistan ([Wirsing & Jasparro, 2006](#)). Following partition in 1947, India has controlled a large portion of the Indus basin including the water supply for 90% of irrigated land in Pakistan ([TBL, 2014](#)). Pre-emptive diplomatic engagement to avoid water conflict led to the Indus Water Treaty in 1960. This treaty defined the principles for sharing water from the Indus ([PILDAT, 2012](#)). Although the treaty has been largely successful in regulating water distribution between the two states and has functioned throughout recurring periods of diplomatic breakdown, recent hydro-infrastructure programs in India have caused diplomatic tensions with Pakistan.

Indus river basin

The Indus river basin originates in the Himalayan Mountains and 39% of the basin flows through India followed by 47% flowing through Pakistan ([FAO, 2011](#)). In Pakistan, 90% of the country's food and 65% of its employment depend on agriculture sustained by the Indus Basin and its tributaries ([Pohl & Schmeier, 2014](#)). Pakistan struggles with water shortages and its downstream position to India makes it inherently vulnerable to developments on the Indus across the border.

Indus River Treaty

Under the Indus River Treaty, control over the three eastern tributaries of the Indus River—Ravi, Sutluj, and Beas—is granted to India and the three western tributaries—Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab—to Pakistan. Both states are required to ensure the flow of their rivers into the neighbouring state, with minor exceptions, including the development of particular hydropower projects and water extraction for agricultural use ([Wolf & Newton, 2014](#)).

Water stress

India has arguably contributed to increased water stress within Pakistan by building dams across a number of tributaries, thus causing diplomatic tensions. Climate change is expected to further challenge water distribution and hydro-development in Pakistan and India as Himalayan glaciers are melting, initially increasing vulnerability to flooding and downstream pollution, and later affecting water availability of the Indus as a whole ([Diamond, 2014](#); [Dharmadhikary, 2008](#)). Many Pakistanis believe that India uses its upstream dams to manipulate how much water flows down into Pakistan via the Indus. It is this inherent suspicion and mistrust between the two states that has also been used by terrorist groups to provoke anti-Indian sentiment in Pakistan, providing fertile ground for conflict ([Katchinoff, 2010](#)).

Observers from both sides have criticised the treaty as outdated and an obstruction to rational exploitation of the Indus River's resources, as it limits possibilities of storing water ([Wirsing & Jasparro, 2006](#)). The treaty is increasingly strained as both sides pursue hydro-development projects to mitigate water and energy shortages; or to take pre-emptive action against natural disasters, such as flooding or drought, which are becoming more frequent and intense with climate change.



Resolution Efforts

The World Bank as a facilitator

The World Bank brokered negotiations of the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) for ten years. As an incentive for both states to settle on the treaty, the World Bank rewarded both Pakistan and India with aid to build storage and conveyance facilities to provide water supplies that were supposedly lost by the agreement (Mustafa, 2010).

The Indus Water Treaty

Under the Indus Water Treaty a Permanent Indus Commission was established, composed of equal numbers of representatives from India and Pakistan (Wolf & Newton, 2014). All developments along the Indus must be reported to the other party. Any difference of opinion regarding interpretation of the application of the treaty is first referred to the Commission. Should a difference of opinion be acknowledged, an independent third party may be approached. If the difference of opinion is regarded as a dispute by the neutral party, a court of arbitration can be established to resolve the issue (Wasi, 2009). This process of conflict resolution has been invoked only once since the signing of the treaty. It was successful in settling the disagreement over Baglihar dam. However, Pakistan continues to express its dissatisfaction with the IWT and has suggested the treaty be reviewed (Kokab & Nawaz, 2013).

Outlook

Critics of the IWT highlight that it does not allow for joint development of the Indus basin between the two states and does not consider the effect of climate change on water availability. It is also pointed out that there are no restrictions on how many dams India can build in the Indus basin, nor is water distributed quantitatively, thus creating the potential for water exploitation by India (Kokab & Nawaz, 2013).



Intensities & Influences

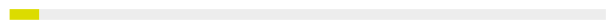


INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity

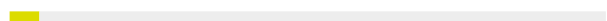


Human Suffering



INFLUENCES

Environmental Influences



Societal Influences



Diplomatic Crisis

Note of diplomatic crisis in case history, conflict purely verbal



Violent Conflict

No



Salience with nation

National



Mass displacement

None



Cross Border Mass Displacement

No



Resolution Success

Reduction in geographical scope

There has been no reduction in geographical scope.



Increased capacity to address grievance in the future

The capacity to address grievances in the future has increased.



Grievance Resolution

Grievances have been partially addressed.



Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity

There has been no reduction in intensity





Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Mediation & arbitration

2

The IWT established a Permanent Indus Commission conformed of representatives from both India and Pakistan to broker any disagreements between the parties.

Treaty/agreement

3

The Indus Water Treaty (IWT) of 1960 defined the principles for sharing water from the Indus River. The treaty has been criticized for being outdated, not specifying the use of the river's resources within its possible limits, and neglecting to consider the effects of climate change. Pakistan has suggested the treaty be reviewed because it facilitates exploitation by India.

Resources and Materials

References with URL

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[Abbasi, A. \(2012\). The Indus Water Treaty between Pakistan and India](#)

[Wolf, A. & Newton, J. \(2014\). Case Study of Transboundary Dispute Resolution: The Indus Water Treaty](#)

[Wirsing, A. & Jasparro, C. \(2006\). Spotlight on Indus River Democracy: India, Pakistan and Baglihar Dam](#)

[FAO \(2011\). Indus Basin](#)

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[Diamond, K. \(2014\). Adil Najam: Pakistan's Security Problems Distract From Climate Vulnerabilities](#)

[Dharmadhikary, S. \(2008\). Mountains of Concrete. Dam Building in the Himalayas](#)

[Pohl, B. & Schmeier, S. \(2014\). Hydro-Diplomacy Can Build Peace Over Shared Waters, But Needs More Support](#)

Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/water-conflict-indus-basin-between-india-and-pakistan>