

WEAPONIZING WATER: INDIA'S ATTEMPT TO SUSPEND THE INDUS WATERS TREATY AND PAKISTAN'S STRATEGIC VULNERABILITY

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Introduction

The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) has long been one of the few durable frameworks between India and Pakistan. Brokered by the World Bank in 1960, it allocated the eastern rivers to India and the western rivers to Pakistan and continued to function through wars, military crises and prolonged political hostility.¹ On 23 April 2025, India placed the treaty “in abeyance” after the Pahalgam incident, linking its restoration to allegations of cross-border terrorism that Pakistan rejects.²

The decision marks a departure from the established practice of keeping water cooperation separate from wider security disputes. It does not mean that India can immediately stop the western rivers. Its present leverage lies in suspending hydrological data sharing, weakening flood-warning and irrigation planning, making treaty cooperation conditional on political demands, and accelerating upstream infrastructure. Pakistan’s water crisis predates the current dispute, but the abeyance has added an external strategic risk to an already fragile system.

¹ World Bank, “Fact Sheet: The Indus Waters Treaty 1960 and the Role of the World Bank,” June 11, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/brief/fact-sheet-the-indus-waters-treaty-1960-and-the-world-bank>.

² Dawn, “Pahalgam Attack: India Suspends Indus Waters Treaty,” April 23, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906075/pahalgam-attack-india-suspends-indus-waters-treaty-with-immediate-effect-closes-wagah-attari-border>

Non-Traditional Security Implications for Pakistan

For Pakistan, the Indus system is the foundation of food production, rural livelihoods and economic activity. Roughly 80 percent of cultivated land is irrigated by the western rivers, which support close to 90 percent of national food production. As the downstream state, Pakistan has no comparable alternative source if these flows are disrupted.³

The suspension of routine hydrological data including river discharge, reservoir levels and flood warnings has weakened the ability of Pakistani institutions to plan irrigation releases and prepare for floods.⁴ Water managers have increasingly relied on satellite-based estimates that reportedly carry a margin of error of about 25 percent.⁵ The risk extends well beyond the water sector. Agriculture employs around 37 percent of the labour force and supports the livelihoods of roughly two-thirds of the rural population.⁶ A prolonged disruption during the Kharif or Rabi season could reduce crop output, raise food prices and place the heaviest burden on small farmers, fishing communities and low-income households across a basin that sustains an estimated 300 million people.⁷

Climate change makes this vulnerability more acute. Glacial melt and increasingly erratic river flows are already complicating water management. The loss of timely upstream data reduces early-warning capacity precisely when Pakistan faces greater risks of both floods and seasonal shortages. Strategic pressure and climate stress are therefore reinforcing rather than separate challenges.

Pakistan's Legal and Diplomatic Position

Pakistan maintains that the IWT contains no provision allowing unilateral suspension or abeyance. Article XII (4) provides that the treaty may be modified or terminated only through a duly ratified agreement between both states.⁸ Pakistan also argues that India's stated grounds do not meet the

³ David Michel, "Can India Cut Off Pakistan's Indus River Lifeline?" Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), May 1, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/can-india-cut-pakistans-indus-river-lifeline>

⁴ *The Nation*, "India Stops Sharing Key Water Data, Violating Indus Water Treaty," November 25, 2025, <https://www.nation.com.pk/25-Nov-2025/india-stops-sharing-key-water-data-violating-indus-water-treaty>

⁵ Neda Zawahri and Melissa McCracken, "The India-Pakistan Water Dispute: Unpacking the Health Consequences," *Think Global Health*, July 22, 2025, <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/india-pakistan-water-dispute-unpacking-health-consequences>

⁶ David Michel, "Can India Cut Off Pakistan's Indus River Lifeline?" Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), May 1, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/can-india-cut-pakistans-indus-river-lifeline>

⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *Transboundary River Basin Overview—Indus* (Rome: FAO, 2011), <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/4cb697e5-01b8-45ba-ade6-50ea1c703ea7/content>

⁸ *Indus Waters Treaty*, September 19, 1960, art. XII, United Nations Treaty Series 419, no. 6032, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20419/volume-419-I-6032-English.pdf>

high threshold for a fundamental change of circumstances under international treaty law.⁹ Islamabad has continued to use the treaty's dispute-settlement procedures and has pressed its case before the Court of Arbitration. The World Bank's role remains largely procedural and does not extend to enforcing awards or compelling either party to comply.

India's Stated Position

India presents the abeyance as a response to Pakistan's alleged support for cross-border terrorism. New Delhi also argues that demographic change, expanding energy and irrigation demand, and delays in dispute resolution justify a reassessment of the treaty. Since April 2025, India has moved to accelerate hydropower and canal projects on the western rivers, including the Chenab. Pakistan views these steps as an effort to gain greater unilateral control over shared flows.¹⁰

Pakistan's Domestic Water Vulnerabilities

Several of Pakistan's most serious water problems predate India's decision. Storage has remained inadequate, irrigation losses are high, monitoring systems are incomplete, and federal–provincial coordination remains uneven. These weaknesses are not caused by India, and a favourable legal outcome will not resolve them.

- 1. Limited storage capacity:** National storage is estimated at roughly 30 days of demand. The delayed completion of major reservoirs, including the Diamer-Bhasha Dam, leaves the country with little room to absorb extended supply shocks.¹¹
- 2. Dependence on external data:** Pakistan's telemetry and satellite-monitoring network is not yet comprehensive. With treaty-based data sharing suspended, gaps in real-time flow and flood forecasting have become more consequential.¹²

⁹ *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*, May 23, 1969, arts. 26 and 62, 1155 U.N.T.S. 331, https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1_1_1969.pdf

¹⁰ Umair Jamal, "Pakistan Ups the Ante on Indus Water Dispute With India," *The Diplomat*, July 7, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/07/pakistan-ups-the-ante-on-indus-water-dispute-with-india/>

¹¹ *Arab News*, "Pakistan Accelerates Four Major Dam Projects Amid Growing Water Security Concerns," May 31, 2026, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2645567/pakistan>

¹² *The Nation*, "India Stops Sharing Key Water Data, Violating Indus Water Treaty," November 25, 2025, <https://www.nation.com.pk/25-Nov-2025/india-stops-sharing-key-water-data-violating-indus-water-treaty>

3. Fragmented governance: Water management is divided among federal institutions and the provinces, while no consistently effective mechanism provides unified authority over planning, allocation and crisis response.¹³

4. Low irrigation efficiency: An estimated 40 percent of irrigation water is lost before reaching crops. When overall supplies tighten, these losses translate directly into lower agricultural resilience and greater pressure on provincial allocations.¹⁴

Policy Recommendations

The response should combine immediate legal and diplomatic action with medium- and long-term investment in monitoring, governance and storage. The following measures translate that approach into an implementation framework:

- Sustain the legal process: Prepare coordinated submissions, retain technical and legal expertise, and continue engagement with the IWT dispute-settlement process.
- Create a verified violations record: Maintain a central record of withheld data, official correspondence, project activity and field evidence for use in legal and diplomatic proceedings.
- Expand targeted diplomacy: Present Pakistan's legal position consistently in bilateral and multilateral forums while avoiding rhetoric that weakens the technical case.
- Strengthen independent monitoring: Upgrade telemetry stations, improve satellite analysis and integrate river-flow monitoring with flood-warning and disaster-management systems.
- Improve water governance and efficiency: Institutionalise federal–provincial coordination, address allocation disputes, strengthen compliance with existing arrangements and reduce conveyance losses.

¹³ Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Muhammad Saeed, "Pakistan-India Indus Water Treaty at a Strategic Crossroads (Part I)," *Asia News Network*, July 8, 2026, <https://asianews.network/pakistan-india-indus-water-treaty-at-a-strategic-crossroads-part-1/>

¹⁴ Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Muhammad Saeed, "Pakistan-India Indus Water Treaty at a Strategic Crossroads (Part I)," *Asia News Network*, July 8, 2026, <https://asianews.network/pakistan-india-indus-water-treaty-at-a-strategic-crossroads-part-1/>

- Increase strategic storage: Accelerate viable reservoir projects, improve maintenance of existing infrastructure and align new storage with transparent environmental and provincial consultation.

Conclusion

India's decision to place the IWT in abeyance marks a serious departure from more than six decades of treaty-based cooperation. It has weakened data sharing and increased uncertainty around Pakistan's water, food and economic security, even though India does not yet possess the capacity to stop the western rivers at will. Pakistan must therefore resist attempts to make water cooperation conditional on unrelated political disputes while addressing the domestic weaknesses that amplify external pressure. Legal and diplomatic action can preserve treaty rights, but durable resilience will depend on better monitoring, stronger federal–provincial coordination, improved irrigation efficiency and additional storage. Keeping the Indus system governed by rules rather than coercion remains in the long-term interest of both states.