



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

Modi threatens Water War with Pakistan: An Assessment

Mahwish Hafeez, Research Fellow, ISSI

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Indus Water Treaty (IWT) - a trans-boundary water sharing treaty between India and Pakistan that was hailed for withstanding even the most difficult times including the 1965 and 1971 wars and the Kargil conflict of 1999, is being threatened to be scrapped by India. The reason - Modi government due to its own domestic political compulsions find it convenient to threaten water wars against Pakistan.

Water emerged as a major fault line between India and Pakistan soon after partition as India became an upper riparian with control over the canal headworks that supplied water to lands which became part of Pakistan. Signed on September 9, 1960 with the cooperation of World Bank after several rounds of earlier negotiations and other interim agreements did not solve the water sharing problem between the two countries, the Indus Water Treaty has since survived all ups and downs of India-Pakistan relations unlike other agreements and CBMs that vanished into thin air once the relations soured between the two countries.

The current phase of tension between the two countries started following the assassination of a young Kashmiri freedom fighter Burhan Wani in July this year which led to massive protests across the Indian held Kashmir that resulted not only in deaths of innocent protesters but the use of pellet guns by Indian Security forces that also blinded hundreds of Kashmiri youths.

Days before Pakistan was about to raise the gross human rights violations of the Kashmiri people at the hands of Indian security forces in the UN General Assembly Session, an attack was launched at a military base in Uri sector¹. Since then, while blaming Pakistan, India has tried everything at its disposal to isolate Pakistan internationally. As a non-military mean to put pressure on Pakistan or to ruin Pakistan's economy, India also threatened Pakistan with dire consequences including the review of Indus Water Treaty and exploiting the Western rivers that were assigned to Pakistan under the IWT. The Modi government even went to the extent of announcing of forming an Inter-Ministerial Task Force for the review of the Treaty saying that "blood and water cannot flow together".²

Similar references were again made by Indian Prime Minister recently regarding the waters of Eastern rivers that are under Indian control. While addressing a rally in Bathinda, Punjab, Prime Minister Modi expressed his nefarious design of stopping "every drop of this water"³ to Pakistan. He criticised previous governments for "waters kept flowing to Pakistan but successive governments kept sleeping on this issue and my farmer kept crying for the want of water".⁴ He went on to say that a task force has been constituted to ensure that each drop of water that flows out of Sutlej, Ravi and Beas reaches Punjab, and Jammu and Kashmir.

For Pakistan, such statements are not only provocative, but also highly irresponsible. Advisor to the Prime Minister on foreign affairs Mr. Sartaj Aziz has rightly warned India that any such move would be considered as an “act of war”.⁵ He also rightly pointed out that this would set a wrong example in the region, as well as around the world.

Despite such provocations, one can only hope that these statements are made more for domestic consumption. Besides his repeated promises of being tough on Pakistan if elected to power throughout his election campaign, the approaching state elections in Punjab which are due to be held between the months of February and March 2017 are also perhaps the reason for this anti-Pakistan rhetoric. In his effort to woo the farmers, as well as the general public of Punjab, Modi may have thought it to be the best tactic to play the Pakistan card.

Similarly, Indian government's decision to demonitise Rs. 500 and 1000 notes without proper planning and preparation could also be a reason. The decision was announced on November 8, 2016 and since then, the Indian people have suffered immensely as long queues were seen outside banks. More than 50 people lost their lives standing in these long queues. Further, as of November 21, 2016, i.e. in less than two weeks, around 11 bank officers are said to have died due to severe pressure and panic.⁶ The situation is such that the former Prime Minister Mr. Manmohan Singh who is also a celebrated economist has called it a “monumental disaster”.⁷ Currently, the Indian masses are outraged and protests are being held throughout India. For Modi, making statements against Pakistan could be a desperate effort to divert the attention of people from these problems and improve his standing in the eyes of the Indian masses.

Apart from the Punjab State elections and the impacts of government's economic policies on people, the fact that the Kashmiri people are keeping their struggle alive and are rendering supreme sacrifices and which is not being missed by the international community could also be a reason for Modi to launch this onslaught against Pakistan in a bid to divert attention of the international community from the situation in Kashmir.

Since Pakistan is one of the water stressed countries and a major portion of its GDP depends on agriculture, Pakistan cannot and should not ignore these developments. Though it has already made it clear to India that any such move would certainly have severe repercussions for the region, it is also need of hour that international community is made aware of Indian intentions and its impact on Pakistan. Regional countries, specially Bangladesh and Nepal, who also have water sharing disputes with

India should also be made to realise that in future they also might have to face similar situation. Furthermore, in order to meet any eventuality, Pakistan should also work to present its case from legal and technical aspect effectively in case India goes ahead with its stated intentions and the matter is ultimately referred to any international forum for arbitration. Pakistan also need to keep a close eye on the dams that are already being built by India or are being planned, to counter any violation of the IWT without any delays.

It is indeed extremely unfortunate that in order to get short-term political gains or to divert attention of the Indian masses and the international community from the disastrous economic policies, Prime Minister Modi is stroking hatred among the people of two countries. These feelings of hatred and revenge are being intensified when the people of Subcontinent need peace more than ever before and more cooperation to fight the common enemies like poverty, and food shortage. By stopping the waters to Pakistan, India would not only be morally wrong and violator of international law (as there is no clause in the Treaty that might give right to either India or Pakistan to renounce the Treaty unilaterally), but will also be solely responsible for the horrendous consequences it will have on humanity, be it in the form of a famine or the devastation caused by a war. Unilateral withdrawal or denying Pakistan its due share of water would not serve India's purpose. Instead, it would badly damage the image that India wishes to show to the international community. No sane mind would ever support this kind of a move that is meant to endanger lives of millions of people. It also has to be realised by India that Burhan Wani was not a Pakistani nor thousands of people who came out to protest his killing were Pakistanis. Unless India understands the aspirations of the Kashmiri people with an open heart and mind, the fate of around 1.7 billion people of South Asia will remain hostage to an uncertain future and a dwindling peace in the region.

Notes and References:

- ¹ "18 Jawans Killed in Pre-dawn Strike at Uri," *The Hindu*, September 18, 2016
- ² "PM Modi Reviews Indus Water Treaty, says 'blood and water can't flow together'," *Times of India*, September 26, 2016
- ³ "River waters to be stopped from going waste in Pakistan: PM Modi on Indus Water Treaty," *Times of India*, November 25, 2016
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ "Revocation of Indus Waters Treaty can be taken as an act of war: Sartaj Aziz," *Dawn*, September 27, 2016
- ⁶ "RBI head must quit for havoc: Leader of Bank officers union," *The Indian Express*, November 21, 2016
- ⁷ "Manmohan Calls demonetisation a 'Monumental Disaster'," *The Hindu*, November 25, 2016