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Water as a Weapon and Bridge: Pakistan's Transboundary Diplomacy in the Indus Basin

Ms. Najma Naz

Assistant Professor (Pakistan Studies), Parul Ilyas Government Girls Degree College
Setharja/ M.Phil Scholar Shah Abdul Latif University Khair Pur

najmanaz10095@gmail.com

Ms. Nusrat Khaskheli

Assistant Professor (Pakistan studies), Parul Ilyas Government Girls Degree College
Setharja/ M.Phil Scholar Shah Abdul Latif University Khair Pur

nusratkhaskheli72@gmail.com

Shafique Hussain Wassan

Lecturer SNAK Superior Science College Khairpur Mirs/ Ph.D Sholar, Islamia
University of Bahawlapur

shafiquewassan@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines Pakistan's transboundary water diplomacy in the Indus Basin through the conceptual lens of water as both a weapon and a bridge, highlighting the interplay between conflict and cooperation in one of the world's most politically sensitive river systems. It situates water within the broader framework of international relations, emphasizing its growing significance as a strategic resource shaped by geopolitical tensions, institutional arrangements, and environmental pressures. The study explores the historical and legal foundations of Indus Basin governance, focusing on the Indus Waters Treaty as a durable yet evolving mechanism that has enabled sustained engagement between Pakistan and India despite recurring conflicts. It further analyzes the securitization of water in Pakistan's foreign policy discourse, where upstream developments and hydropower projects are often perceived as threats, contributing to a narrative of vulnerability and strategic competition. At the same time, the article highlights the cooperative dimensions of water diplomacy, including institutional mechanisms, confidence building measures, and the role of international actors in facilitating dialogue and dispute resolution. By integrating insights from hydro political theory, environmental diplomacy, and international law, the study demonstrates that water governance in the Indus Basin is characterized by a dynamic balance between rivalry and collaboration. It argues that Pakistan's diplomatic approach reflects both the constraints of its downstream position and the opportunities presented by institutionalized cooperation, particularly in the context of climate change and increasing resource scarcity. The article concludes that the future of transboundary water relations in the region will depend on the capacity of states to adapt existing frameworks, strengthen cooperative mechanisms, and reconceptualises water as a shared asset rather than a contested resource.

Keywords: *Transboundary Water Diplomacy, Indus Basin, Pakistan Foreign Policy, Water Securitization, Environmental Cooperation, Indus Waters Treaty.*

Introduction

Water has emerged as a critical strategic resource in international relations, increasingly shaping state behavior, security discourses, and patterns of cooperation and conflict across regions. Scholars have long argued that access

to freshwater is no longer merely an environmental or developmental concern but a core component of national power and geopolitical stability, particularly in regions marked by scarcity and asymmetrical control of upstream and downstream flows (Gleick, 1993; Wolf, 1998). As global demand for water intensifies due to population growth, urbanization, and climate variability, states are compelled to integrate water considerations into foreign policy and security frameworks. This shift has contributed to the growing prominence of hydro politics, where rivers, aquifers, and shared basins become arenas of negotiation, contestation, and sometimes confrontation. At the same time, empirical research challenges deterministic notions of inevitable water wars by demonstrating that cooperation has historically been more common than conflict in transboundary basins (Wolf et al., 2003). This duality underscores the complex nature of water as both a potential trigger of disputes and a catalyst for diplomatic engagement, making it a uniquely multifaceted element in international relations.

Globally, transboundary water politics reflects a dynamic interplay between competition and collaboration, shaped by legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and power asymmetries among riparian states. There are more than 260 international river basins worldwide, many of which are governed by treaties and cooperative arrangements that seek to balance competing interests while ensuring sustainable resource management (UN Water, 2021). However, these arrangements are often tested by shifting geopolitical realities, technological advancements in water infrastructure, and the growing impacts of climate change. In regions such as the Nile Basin, the Mekong River, and Central Asia, upstream development projects have generated tensions, highlighting how control over water flows can translate into strategic leverage (Zeitoun and Warner, 2006). Yet, the same basins also illustrate the potential for institutionalized cooperation, confidence building, and conflict mitigation through dialogue and data sharing. This global context provides an essential lens for understanding the Indus Basin, where similar patterns of rivalry and cooperation coexist within a highly sensitive geopolitical environment. The persistence of cooperative mechanisms despite recurrent tensions suggests that water diplomacy can serve as a stabilizing force even in conflict prone regions.

For Pakistan, the Indus Basin is not only a lifeline for agriculture and economic development but also a cornerstone of national security and state survival. The basin supports the world's largest contiguous irrigation system and sustains a significant proportion of the country's food production and rural livelihoods (Briscoe and Qamar, 2006). Given Pakistan's downstream position, its dependence on upstream flows originating in India adds a layer of strategic vulnerability, amplifying concerns over water availability and control. The Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, widely regarded as one of the most successful water sharing agreements, has played a pivotal role in regulating these relations and preventing large scale conflict despite periods of political hostility (World Bank, 2018). However, emerging challenges such as climate induced variability, glacial melt, and increasing water demand are placing unprecedented stress on the basin's governance structures (Immerzeel et al., 2010). Within this context, Pakistan's water diplomacy embodies a dual framing in which water is perceived both as a potential instrument of coercion and as a platform for cooperation. The securitization of water reflects fears of scarcity and external control, while continued engagement through treaty mechanisms demonstrates

a commitment to institutionalized collaboration. This article argues that Pakistan's approach to transboundary water diplomacy is defined by this intricate balance between conflict and cooperation, shaped by historical agreements, regional power dynamics, and the evolving pressures of climate change.

Literature Review

The literature on hydro politics situates water at the intersection of power, geography, and security, offering a robust foundation for understanding transboundary dynamics in shared river basins. Early scholarship framed water scarcity as a potential driver of interstate conflict, emphasizing material constraints and strategic competition among riparian states, yet subsequent research has complicated this view by demonstrating that political institutions and norms mediate outcomes more than physical scarcity alone (Wolf, 1998; Zeitoun & Warner, 2006). The concept of water securitization has gained traction in this regard, highlighting how political actors construct water as an existential threat to justify extraordinary policy measures and consolidate control over resources (Buzan et al., 1998; Fischhendler, 2015). Within this framework, hydro politics is not merely about allocation but about discourse, perception, and the mobilization of national identity. Environmental diplomacy literature complements this perspective by focusing on mechanisms of cooperation, including treaty formation, joint management institutions, and confidence building measures that enable states to transcend zero sum calculations (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Sadoff & Grey, 2002). Together, these approaches underscore that water governance is shaped by both material realities and socially constructed meanings, making it a fertile domain for interdisciplinary analysis.

The debate between constructivist and realist interpretations further enriches the theoretical landscape by offering competing explanations for state behavior in transboundary water contexts. Realist scholars tend to emphasize power asymmetries, upstream control, and strategic leverage, arguing that stronger states can impose their preferences through infrastructural dominance or coercive diplomacy (Mearsheimer, 2001; Zeitoun & Warner, 2006). From this perspective, water becomes an instrument of national interest, embedded within broader geopolitical rivalries. In contrast, constructivist approaches focus on the role of norms, identities, and shared understandings in shaping cooperative outcomes, suggesting that even adversarial states can develop stable arrangements through repeated interaction and institutionalization (Wendt, 1999; Checkel, 2001). This theoretical divide is reflected in the broader discourse on water wars versus water cooperation, where alarmist narratives of inevitable conflict are increasingly challenged by empirical evidence showing a predominance of negotiated settlements and sustained collaboration (Wolf et al., 2003; De Stefano et al., 2012). The persistence of cooperative frameworks despite political tensions suggests that water can function as a bridge rather than a battleground, although this potential is contingent on the presence of effective institutions and mutual recognition of interdependence.

International law plays a pivotal role in structuring transboundary water governance, providing normative principles and legal mechanisms that guide state conduct and facilitate dispute resolution. Foundational doctrines such as equitable and reasonable utilization and the obligation not to cause significant harm have been codified in instruments like the United Nations Convention on

the Law of the Non Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, shaping expectations of fairness and sustainability among riparian states (McCaffrey, 2007; Salman, 2007). Scholars have highlighted the importance of legal regimes in reducing uncertainty, enhancing transparency, and promoting long term cooperation, particularly in basins characterized by asymmetrical power relations (Boisson de Chazournes, 2013; Rieu Clarke et al., 2012). The Indus Waters Treaty stands out in this literature as a paradigmatic example of successful conflict management, having endured decades of political hostility between India and Pakistan while maintaining a functional framework for water sharing (Wolf, 1999; World Bank, 2018). Its detailed provisions, third party facilitation, and institutionalized mechanisms have been widely praised for insulating water issues from broader geopolitical disputes. However, critical scholarship points to limitations in the treaty's design, including its rigid allocation structure, limited scope for addressing environmental change, and challenges in adapting to new hydrological realities (Briscoe & Qamar, 2006; Mustafa, 2010).

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, several gaps remain that are particularly relevant for understanding Pakistan's contemporary water diplomacy. Much of the literature treats Pakistan as a passive recipient of upstream actions, with insufficient attention to its evolving strategies, diplomatic initiatives, and engagement with international forums. There is also a tendency to analyze the Indus Basin through a narrow security lens, overlooking the broader spectrum of non-traditional security concerns such as climate change, energy transitions, and socio economic vulnerability (Khan, 2019; Rasul, 2016). Recent studies emphasize that climate induced variability, glacial retreat, and extreme weather events are reshaping water availability and intensifying uncertainty, thereby necessitating more adaptive and integrated governance approaches (Immerzeel et al., 2010; Laghari et al., 2012). Yet these dimensions are often treated as peripheral rather than central to hydro political analysis. Furthermore, the interplay between domestic water management challenges and external diplomatic positioning remains underexplored, limiting our understanding of how internal constraints influence Pakistan's negotiating behavior. Addressing these gaps requires a more holistic framework that integrates traditional hydro political analysis with insights from climate science, political economy, and international relations theory, thereby capturing the full complexity of water as both a source of vulnerability and an opportunity for cooperation.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how Pakistan frames water as both a strategic asset and diplomatic tool
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of Pakistan's transboundary water diplomacy in the Indus Basin
3. To examine the role of the Indus Waters Treaty in shaping regional water relations
4. To explore emerging challenges like climate change, population growth, infrastructure politics

Research Questions

1. How does Pakistan conceptualize water as both a "weapon" and a "bridge" in its foreign policy?

2. What are the strengths and limitations of Pakistan's diplomatic engagement under the Indus Waters Treaty?
3. How do regional power dynamics influence water-sharing arrangements?
4. What role do climate and environmental changes play in reshaping transboundary water diplomacy?

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and exploratory research design to examine Pakistan's transboundary water diplomacy within the Indus Basin, allowing for an in depth interpretation of complex political and institutional dynamics that cannot be captured through quantitative approaches alone. A case study method is employed, focusing specifically on the Indus Basin as a critical site of interaction between competing national interests and cooperative frameworks, thereby enabling a contextualized understanding of water governance and diplomacy. The research draws on both primary and secondary data sources to ensure analytical rigor and triangulation. Primary sources include treaty documents such as the Indus Waters Treaty, official government statements, and policy briefs that reflect state positions and institutional practices. Secondary sources consist of peer reviewed academic literature, reports from international organizations, and analytical studies that provide broader theoretical and empirical insights into hydro politics and environmental diplomacy. The analytical framework integrates hydro political analysis with discourse analysis to capture both material and ideational dimensions of water governance, particularly the ways in which water is framed as a security concern or as a platform for cooperation. However, the study acknowledges certain limitations, including reliance on publicly available data and the constraints imposed by geopolitical sensitivity, which restrict access to confidential negotiations and may limit the depth of insight into state level decision making processes.

Historical and Legal Foundations

The Indus Basin constitutes one of the most historically significant and hydrologically complex river systems in the world, underpinning the socio economic and political evolution of South Asia for centuries. Originating in the Tibetan Plateau and flowing through India and Pakistan before emptying into the Arabian Sea, the basin supports a vast agrarian economy and sustains millions of livelihoods, making it central to regional stability and development (Briscoe & Qamar, 2006; Immerzeel et al., 2010). Its importance became particularly pronounced during the colonial period when extensive irrigation infrastructure transformed the basin into one of the largest contiguous irrigation networks globally, embedding water management within administrative and political frameworks (Gilmartin, 1994). The partition of British India in 1947 fundamentally altered this arrangement by dividing the basin between two sovereign states, creating immediate tensions over water control and access. Early disputes emerged when upstream India temporarily halted water flows to Pakistan in 1948, exposing the vulnerability of downstream dependence and highlighting the absence of a formalized governance mechanism (Wolf, 1999; Salman & Uprety, 2002). These initial confrontations underscored the strategic significance of water and set the stage for subsequent diplomatic efforts aimed at institutionalizing cooperation and preventing escalation.

The resolution of early disputes culminated in the signing of the Indus Waters Treaty in 1960, widely regarded as a landmark agreement in the field of

transboundary water governance. Brokered with the active mediation of the World Bank, the treaty established a comprehensive framework for the allocation and management of the basin's waters, dividing the three eastern rivers for India's use and the three western rivers for Pakistan, while allowing limited uses by each side under specified conditions (World Bank, 2018; McCaffrey, 2007). The treaty's design reflects a pragmatic approach that prioritizes functional separation over joint management, thereby reducing the potential for conflict by minimizing interdependence in water use. The role of international actors, particularly the World Bank, was instrumental in facilitating negotiations, providing technical expertise, and offering financial support for infrastructure development that enabled the transition to the new allocation system (Alam, 2002; Biswas, 1992). In addition to its allocation provisions, the treaty established institutional mechanisms such as the Permanent Indus Commission, which serves as a bilateral forum for information exchange, inspection, and dispute resolution. This institutionalization of dialogue has been critical in maintaining communication channels and addressing technical disagreements before they escalate into political crises, thereby reinforcing the treaty's durability.

Over time, the resilience of the Indus Waters Treaty has been tested by recurrent political tensions, military conflicts, and evolving environmental challenges, yet it has continued to function as a stable framework for water sharing between India and Pakistan. Scholars often cite the treaty as a rare example of sustained cooperation between adversarial states, noting that it has survived multiple wars and periods of heightened hostility without collapse (Wolf, 1999; Dinar et al., 2015). Its success is attributed to several factors, including clear allocation rules, robust dispute resolution mechanisms, and the insulation of water issues from broader geopolitical disputes. However, contemporary assessments also point to limitations in the treaty's capacity to address emerging challenges such as climate variability, population growth, and technological changes in water infrastructure (Briscoe & Qamar, 2006; Laghari et al., 2012). The rigid division of rivers, while effective in reducing conflict, constrains adaptive management and limits opportunities for integrated basin wide planning. Moreover, increasing reliance on hydropower projects and concerns over upstream interventions have introduced new dimensions of tension that test the treaty's interpretive flexibility. Despite these challenges, the continued operation of the Permanent Indus Commission and the use of arbitration mechanisms demonstrate the treaty's enduring relevance, suggesting that while imperfect, it remains a foundational pillar of Indus Basin governance and a critical instrument for managing one of the most sensitive transboundary water relationships in the world.

Conflict, Control, and Strategic Leverage

The framing of water as a strategic instrument of power has gained increasing prominence in Pakistan's foreign policy discourse, where it is often securitized as an existential concern tied to national survival and sovereignty. Securitization theory suggests that political actors elevate certain issues into the realm of security through discourse, thereby legitimizing extraordinary measures and shaping public perception (Buzan et al., 1998; Fischhendler, 2015). In the context of the Indus Basin, Pakistan's downstream position reinforces a sense of vulnerability that is frequently articulated in official narratives, policy debates, and media representations. Water is portrayed not

merely as a developmental resource but as a critical determinant of food security, economic stability, and territorial integrity, thereby embedding it within the broader architecture of national security (Mustafa, 2010; Khan, 2019). This framing is further intensified by historical mistrust and recurring political tensions with India, which amplify concerns over control of upstream flows. The securitization of water thus serves both as a reflection of material dependence and as a strategic discourse that mobilizes domestic and international attention to perceived threats, shaping Pakistan's diplomatic posture and reinforcing a defensive orientation in transboundary negotiations.

A central dimension of this securitized perspective lies in the perception of upstream developments, particularly hydropower projects constructed by India on the western rivers allocated to Pakistan under the Indus Waters Treaty. Projects such as Baglihar and Kishanganga have generated significant controversy, with Pakistan expressing concerns over design features, storage capacity, and potential manipulation of water flows (Briscoe & Qamar, 2006; Dinar et al., 2015). These concerns are rooted in both technical and political considerations, as even minor alterations in flow timing can have substantial impacts on irrigation dependent agriculture in Pakistan. Scholars have argued that such disputes illustrate the concept of hydro hegemony, where upstream states leverage their geographical advantage to exert influence over downstream counterparts (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006; Mirumachi, 2015). While the Indus Waters Treaty provides mechanisms for dispute resolution, including neutral expert review and arbitration, the recurrence of disagreements highlights the limitations of existing institutional arrangements in addressing evolving technological and environmental realities. The persistence of these disputes contributes to a climate of suspicion and reinforces the perception that water infrastructure can be used as a tool of strategic leverage, even in the absence of overt coercion.

Political rhetoric during periods of heightened tension further underscores the role of water as a symbolic and strategic weapon in bilateral relations. Statements by political leaders and policymakers often invoke the possibility of restricting water flows or revisiting treaty commitments as a means of signaling resolve or exerting pressure, particularly in the aftermath of security crises (Ganguly & Mukherjee, 2011; Haines et al., 2017). Such rhetoric, while not always translated into concrete policy actions, plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and escalating diplomatic tensions. It also reflects the broader linkage between water issues and geopolitical rivalries, where disputes over rivers become intertwined with concerns related to territorial conflicts, military competition, and regional influence. This interconnectedness complicates efforts to isolate water governance from other domains of conflict, thereby increasing the risk of politicization and reducing the scope for technical cooperation. At the same time, the use of water as a rhetorical tool reveals the limits of coercive strategies, as any attempt to weaponize water is constrained by legal obligations, mutual interdependence, and the potential for international backlash. The Indus Waters Treaty itself acts as a stabilizing framework that restricts unilateral actions and provides avenues for dispute resolution, thereby mitigating the escalation of conflicts.

Despite the prominence of securitized narratives, the effectiveness of water as a coercive instrument remains limited in practice, highlighting the constraints imposed by legal, institutional, and environmental factors. Scholars have

consistently found that attempts to use water as a weapon are often counterproductive, as they undermine trust, invite international scrutiny, and risk destabilizing existing cooperative arrangements (Wolf et al., 2003; De Stefano et al., 2012). In the case of the Indus Basin, the treaty's robust design and third party mechanisms have prevented the translation of rhetorical threats into actionable policies, ensuring continuity in water sharing even during periods of intense political hostility. Furthermore, the physical characteristics of river systems, including variability in flow and the interconnected nature of hydrological processes, limit the feasibility of precise control and manipulation. Climate change adds another layer of complexity by introducing uncertainty and reducing the predictability of water availability, thereby diminishing the strategic utility of coercion (Immerzeel et al., 2010; Rasul, 2016). These factors suggest that while water may be framed as a weapon in political discourse, its practical use as an instrument of coercion is constrained by a combination of legal norms, institutional safeguards, and environmental realities. Consequently, the enduring significance of water in Pakistan's foreign policy lies not in its capacity for coercion but in its dual role as a source of vulnerability and a potential avenue for cooperation within a highly contested geopolitical landscape.

Water as a Bridge: Cooperation, Diplomacy, and Regional Stability

While often framed through a security lens, the Indus Basin also illustrates how water can function as a bridge for sustained cooperation and diplomatic engagement between rival states. The Indus Waters Treaty provides a structured and institutionalized framework that has enabled India and Pakistan to manage shared water resources despite enduring political tensions, demonstrating the stabilizing potential of functional cooperation (World Bank, 2018; Wolf, 1999). Central to this framework are cooperative mechanisms such as the Permanent Indus Commission, which facilitates regular communication, exchange of technical information, and joint inspections, thereby reducing uncertainty and preventing escalation of disputes. Confidence building measures embedded within the treaty, including notification requirements and procedural avenues for addressing disagreements, have contributed to a culture of engagement that persists even during periods of heightened hostility (Dinar et al., 2015; Salman, 2007). These mechanisms reflect a pragmatic recognition of mutual dependence, where both states benefit from predictable and rule based water sharing arrangements. The emphasis on technical cooperation, rather than political bargaining, allows contentious issues to be addressed within a depoliticized institutional setting, reinforcing the treaty's resilience and underscoring the role of water diplomacy as a stabilizing force in a conflict prone region.

Beyond bilateral mechanisms, Pakistan's engagement with international institutions highlights the broader diplomatic potential of water as a platform for cooperation and regional integration. Organizations such as the World Bank have historically played a critical role in facilitating dialogue, providing technical expertise, and supporting dispute resolution processes, thereby enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of transboundary governance (Biswas, 1992; Boisson de Chazournes, 2013). In recent years, the growing impact of climate change has introduced new imperatives for collaboration, as variability in water flows and increasing frequency of extreme events necessitate joint adaptation strategies and data sharing initiatives (Immerzeel et al., 2010;

Rasul, 2016). This evolving context creates opportunities for expanding the scope of water diplomacy beyond allocation disputes toward integrated basin management and climate resilience. Scholars argue that cooperative engagement in areas such as flood forecasting, glacier monitoring, and sustainable infrastructure development can foster trust and generate shared benefits, thereby transforming water from a source of contention into a vehicle for regional stability (Sadoff & Grey, 2002; De Stefano et al., 2012). Pakistan's diplomatic approach, therefore, reflects not only a response to immediate challenges but also an emerging recognition of the long term advantages of collaborative water governance in an increasingly uncertain environmental and geopolitical landscape.

Conclusion

The analysis of Pakistan's transboundary water diplomacy in the Indus Basin reveals a complex and evolving landscape in which water operates simultaneously as a source of tension and a foundation for cooperation. The historical trajectory of the basin demonstrates that while geopolitical rivalries and asymmetrical dependencies have often generated suspicion and conflict oriented narratives, institutional arrangements such as the Indus Waters Treaty have played a critical role in preventing escalation and sustaining dialogue. Pakistan's approach reflects a dual strategic orientation in which water is securitized as a vital national interest while also being leveraged as a domain for engagement and negotiation. This duality is not contradictory but rather indicative of the layered realities of contemporary international relations, where states must navigate competing imperatives of security and interdependence. The persistence of cooperative mechanisms, even during periods of acute political hostility, underscores the resilience of rule based governance and highlights the capacity of technical and institutional frameworks to mitigate conflict. At the same time, the increasing politicization of water issues and the recurrence of disputes over infrastructure projects demonstrate that existing arrangements are under strain, requiring adaptive responses to maintain their relevance.

Looking ahead, the future of Indus Basin governance will depend on the ability of Pakistan and its counterparts to move beyond rigid interpretations of water sharing toward more flexible and integrated approaches that account for emerging challenges. Climate change, population growth, and shifting patterns of resource demand are reshaping the hydrological and political context in ways that cannot be addressed through traditional frameworks alone. In this regard, Pakistan's water diplomacy must evolve to incorporate broader dimensions of environmental cooperation, data sharing, and regional integration, transforming water from a zero sum resource into a platform for collective resilience. Strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing transparency, and fostering trust through sustained engagement will be essential for achieving this transition. Moreover, the integration of water issues into wider regional and global agendas offers opportunities for Pakistan to position itself as a proactive actor in environmental diplomacy. Ultimately, the Indus Basin exemplifies the paradox of shared resources in a contested geopolitical environment, where the same rivers that divide states also bind them together. The challenge and opportunity for Pakistan lie in harnessing this interdependence to build a more stable and cooperative regional order.

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