

Do not renegotiate India and Pakistan's Indus Waters Treaty

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The Indus river system flows across the highly militarised border between India and Pakistan, including the contested territory of Kashmir. Sharing river waters in the basin has caused recurring tensions in bilateral relations between the two countries since 1948. The matter was ostensibly settled by the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) of 1960, but Indian upstream hydropower development in the twenty-first century has caused renewed contention. Some commentators have called for the treaty to be amended or scrapped.

About the research

This research reinterpreted the Indus dispute's origins during the 1940s-1960s. Using new historical documents from India, Pakistan, the US and UK, it highlighted the unique conditions that facilitated the treaty's signing. Politics within India and Pakistan offered a rare moment for compromise. The World Bank mediated negotiations and organised financing. Finally, expensive new infrastructure construction in Pakistan depended on a huge funding package from the US and allied countries.

The treaty left both sides dissatisfied. Pakistani critics charged their government with selling 'Pakistani' rivers to India, while Indian politicians accused theirs of appeasing Pakistani aggression. But the treaty did help to limit tensions over water-sharing.



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Policy implications

- Renegotiating or repealing the Indus Waters Treaty would be very risky unless the context of India-Pakistan relations changes radically. It is unlikely that the two countries would negotiate a better settlement today. Maintaining the status quo requires less political capital than reaching a new agreement.
- Advisers to the Indian and Pakistani governments, international diplomats and international development organisations should encourage the two governments to work within the framework of the existing treaty.
- Advisers, diplomats and development organisations could support any future additional agreement which aims to enable greater environmental protection and ecosystem health, which the original treaty virtually ignores.
- The Indian and Pakistani national water management authorities should consider further proactive agreements for joint action in extreme flood or drought years. These would build on, not alter, the existing treaty.

Key findings

- The IWT took more than a decade to negotiate. It was enabled by a unique historical moment in which India, Pakistan and international actors could push through a settlement. The Indian and Pakistani governments in 1958-1960 both had enough political will and domestic strength to reach a compromise. These circumstances were very rare.
- The IWT partitioned the Indus Basin's rivers, allocating Pakistan the 'western' rivers (roughly 80% of the basin's water flows) and India the 'eastern' rivers (20%). This was designed to minimise the need for ongoing dialogue by allocating water flows to the two countries from separate rivers rather than constructing jointly-managed infrastructure.
- To pay for new dams and canals, the United States and several allies offered Pakistan and India approximately \$8 billion (in 2021 terms) in grants and loans, motivated by Cold War strategic concerns.
- Commentators have suggested that India and Pakistan's territorial dispute over Kashmir has been linked closely to the water dispute. This research found no evidence that either Indian or Pakistani claims on water were primarily motivated by claims on Kashmir, or vice versa.
- The IWT allows India to use some of the basin's 'western' rivers (which are otherwise allocated to Pakistan) for the benefit of Indian-administered Kashmir. Pakistan fears India will use this provision to dam the rivers and 'starve'.

"International disputes over the Indus Basin's water resources have the potential to do huge damage today, just as they did during the 1940s-1950s. The effects of climate change could make matters worse."

Haines, *Rivers Divided*, pg. 3



Further information

Daniel Haines, *Rivers Divided: Indus Basin Waters in the Making of India and Pakistan* (London: Hurst; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

South Asian edition: *Indus Divided: India, Pakistan and the River Basin Dispute* (New Delhi: Penguin HarperCollins, 2017).

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Contact the researchers

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