

India-Pakistan relations

Water or blood: tensions grow over India and Pakistan's shared rivers

Islamabad warns that interrupting water flow after New Delhi's suspension of Indus treaty would be 'act of war'

Andres Schipani in New Delhi and **Humza Jilani** in Islamabad

Published APR 30 2025

After last week's bloody militant assault in Kashmir, India reached for a particularly potent weapon to demonstrate its outrage to Pakistan: water.

For nearly 65 years and through myriad tensions and three wars, the two nations had maintained the Indus Water Treaty that governs the sharing of water across their fractious frontier.

Even after Prime Minister Narendra Modi warned in 2016 that “blood and water cannot flow together” following the killing of 19 soldiers in India-controlled Kashmir, New Delhi stood by the pact.

But now India, which is the upstream power and accuses Pakistan of backing terrorism in the contested region, has [suspended participation](#) in the cross-border water treaty.

The rising tension between the nuclear-armed nations over the rivers of the Indus basin — which traverse one of the world's most volatile geopolitical faultlines and sustain about 300mn people — threatens to add dangerous fuel to [one of Asia's longest-running conflicts](#).

Islamabad, which denies any link to the [April 22 killing of 26 tourists](#) in Pahalgam in the India-controlled territory of Jammu and Kashmir, has warned it will consider any move by New Delhi to limit water flows governed by the treaty to be “an act of war”.

“The largest risk is overreaction, on both sides” said Daanish Mustafa, professor in critical geography at King's College London.





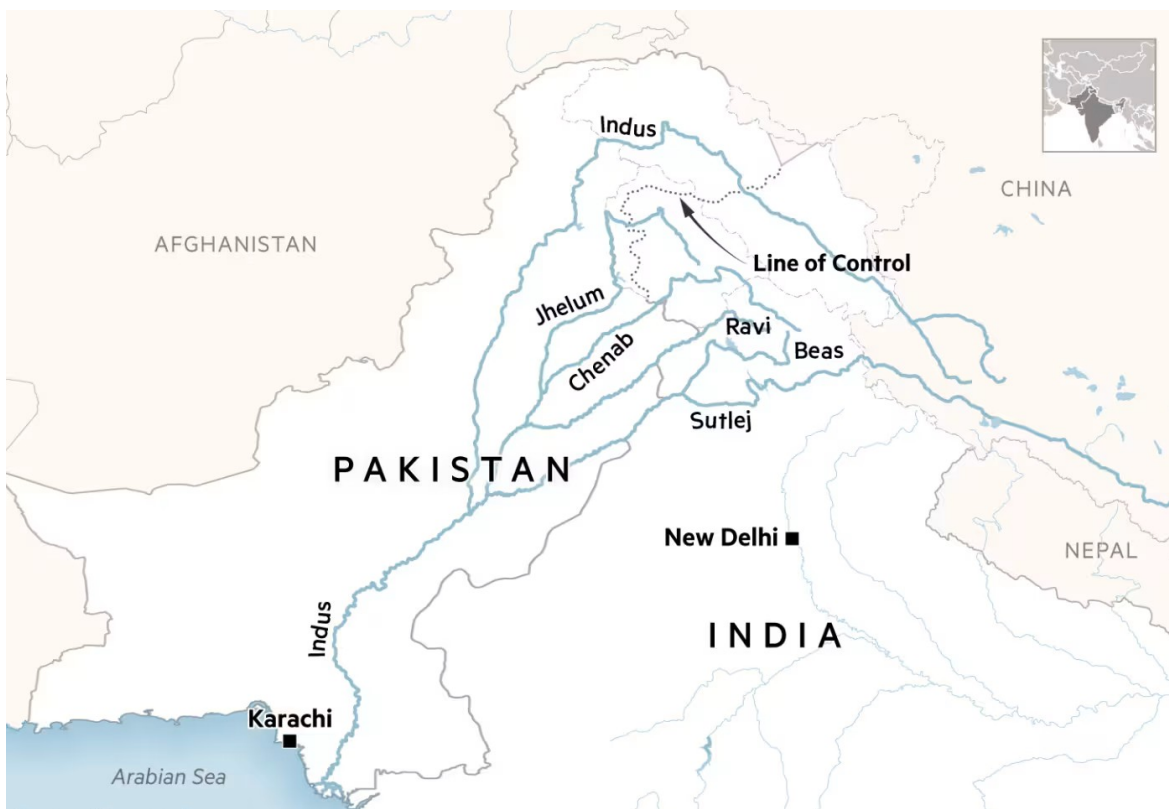
Islamabad has denounced New Delhi's decision to suspend participation in the water treaty © Akhtar Gulfam/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Indian water minister CR Patil hailed his government's decision as "historic", adding ominously that it would "ensure that not even a drop of water from the Indus River goes to Pakistan" at a time when India's neighbour is grappling with an economic crisis.

Former Pakistan foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who is part of the ruling coalition, in turn warned that "either our water will flow through" the Indus or "their blood".

The Indus treaty, which a World Bank spokesperson said this week had been "profoundly important and successful for more than 60 years", was signed in 1960 by India's prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Pakistan's president Ayub Khan.

It awarded use of the three eastern rivers — the Ravi, the Sutlej and the Beas — to India, and of the three western ones — the Indus itself, the Chenab and the Jhelum — to Pakistan downstream.



Source: FT research
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200km

Pakistan depends on the western rivers for about 80 per cent of its agricultural output and a third of its electricity generation.

“The Indus Water Treaty has withstood wars and tensions. Water must not be weaponised,” said Sharmila Faruqui, a member of Pakistan’s national assembly.

Aqeel Malik, minister of state for law in Pakistan, told the Financial Times Islamabad was looking at “all possible legal avenues” to challenge India’s move, including seeking the intervention of the Permanent Court of Arbitration and the World Bank, which initially brokered the treaty and mediates disputes under it.

“This cannot be suspended unilaterally,” he said.

The immediate risk to Pakistan is unpredictability. The treaty requires India to share hydrological data that is crucial for flood, irrigation and hydropower planning, especially during the monsoon season. New Delhi was now “not under obligation to provide” such data, said Kushvinder Vohra, former chair of India’s Central Water Commission.



New Delhi has tightened security in India-controlled Kashmir since the April 22 attack © Yawar Nazir/Getty Images

Still, many are sceptical that India can quickly block or divert much water.

Changing river courses would be a major infrastructural undertaking, while India lacked the storage capacity needed to hold back enough water to hurt Pakistani agriculture, according to Abid Suleri, executive director of the Islamabad-based

Sustainable Development Policy Institute.

“India is not currently in a position to store or divert the water from the three western rivers,” said Himanshu Thakkar, a New Delhi-based water expert with the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People.

But Thakkar added that there were projects under construction on all three rivers that India could now speed up or modify.

Pakistan also fears that freed of treaty controls, India could use the sudden flushing of temporarily withheld water from dams to send devastating “water bombs” downstream.

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India too faces potential threats. Pakistan could block drains on its side of the border, causing toxic wastewater to flood the Indian farmlands. And China, an ally of Pakistan, controls the upper reaches of rivers on which hundreds of millions of India's citizens depend.

Following Modi's 2016 comments, China blocked a tributary of [the Yarlung Tsangpo](#), which is Tibet's longest river and known as the Brahmaputra in India, a move seen by some in New Delhi as showing Beijing's backing for Islamabad.

In Pakistan's south-east Sindh region, bordering India, the water tensions have left sugarcane and mango cultivator Mahmood Nawaz Shah in “existential fear” for his farm. “With India's threats, I fear the Indus might soon not be viable,” he said.

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