

For Pakistan and India, water war has begun

Crucial treaty that governs rivers suspended

By Anupreeta Das, Zia ur-Rehman, and Hari Kumar

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NEW DELHI — The drones and missiles have been stilled after India and Pakistan's brief but intense military battle last month. But the two neighbors have turned up the heat on another long-standing conflict: the sharing of water.

A day after terrorists killed 26 people on the Indian side of Kashmir in April, igniting tensions that would lead to four days of escalating conflict, the Indian government said it would suspend a vital pact governing rivers that flow from India into Pakistan.

That agreement, the Indus Waters Treaty, covers a river system that tens of millions of people rely on for their livelihoods and survival. India, which linked the April attack to Pakistan, said it would step away from its obligations under the pact until its nemesis “credibly and irrevocably” renounced support for cross-border terrorism. Pakistan, which denied any role in the terrorist attack, called India's move an “act of war.”

India's targeting of water, however, is not just about combating terrorism, analysts say. The Indian government has been frustrated by the 65-year-old treaty, believing it has favored Pakistan from the start, and analysts say that India is hoping to force Pakistan to renegotiate it. That could allow India to better use its allotted waters to meet the needs of its immense population and adapt to climate change.

India's decision to put the agreement “in abeyance” — and the vague conditions it has imposed on Pakistan to reverse that — has injected a note of uncertainty into the future of a treaty that has survived multiple wars and conflicts.

A full breakdown would have serious consequences for both countries, especially Pakistan, an arid land with few other sources of water.

Rising temperatures and increased demand make South Asia's water systems among the world's most stressed. The hostile neighbors also share a need to address dangers such as flash floods and glacial lake bursts unleashed by global warming. And if changes in river flows endanger Pakistani lives or employment, India could face international opprobrium.

The treaty specifies how the waters of the Indus River basin

— around which one of the world's oldest civilizations, the Indus Valley civilization, flourished — will be used by the two countries.

The agreement, which became necessary after India and Pakistan became independent nations in 1947, took nine years to negotiate and was signed in 1960 in what its preamble called a “spirit of goodwill,” and with the World Bank as a mediator.

Pakistan has unrestricted use of three western rivers, and India has the same claim to three eastern rivers. India also has limited rights to the western rivers within its territory, including for irrigation, and the ability to build dams for power generation.

Scientists and officials say the treaty has held up because it is a sound legal document that provides for a permanent commission with representatives from each country who are expected to be in regular contact, as well as mechanisms for settling conflicts using neutral experts and arbitration.

India currently has six dams on the western rivers, with plans to build more. Pakistan has raised objections to several of the dam designs and plans, including the Kishenganga hydroelectric project.

Over the past decade, the treaty has encountered increasing geopolitical friction. After attacks on Indian troops in 2016 and 2019 in Indian-administered Kashmir, India announced plans to curtail water flows to Pakistan but did not follow through.

The treaty can be altered by mutual consent. As India has formally sought to revise the treaty, Pakistan has rejected these efforts, according to Indian government records and experts.

India has little ability to substantially reduce the flow of water into Pakistan, and building the infrastructure to do so would take years, experts say.

But Pakistan is unnerved by India's suspension of its participation in the treaty in part because India has stopped providing hydrological data, according to Indian government officials and experts.

Because it is downstream, Pakistan relies heavily on India to share this data, which is crucial for Pakistani agriculture, a sector that accounts for nearly one-quarter of the country's economy and employs 37 percent of the labor force.

Information from India about glacier melt, the speed of floodwaters and precipitation levels, as well as timing decisions on opening sluice gates, is vital for Pakistan to determine its irrigation needs and flood management plans.