

The Indus Waters Treaty: A Year After the Pahalgam Terror Attack

Amit Ranjan

Summary

Following the Pahalgam terror attack in April last year, India and Pakistan have adopted divergent interpretations of the Indus Waters Treaty. For India, the treaty is effectively in abeyance while Pakistan maintains that it remains fully operational.

A year after the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) was placed in “abeyance” by India following the [Pahalgam terror attack](#) in April 2025 which killed 26 people, New Delhi and Islamabad continue to hold divergent interpretations of the agreement. For India, the treaty remains in abeyance; [for Pakistan](#), it is still “fully operational and effective”.

On 30 January 2026, speaking at an ‘Arria-formula’ meeting of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, Pakistan’s Permanent Representative to the UN, [Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad](#), stated that India’s position on the IWT constitutes “a serious violation of international legal obligations, with far-reaching humanitarian, environmental, and peace and security implications”. In turn, [India reiterated its stand](#) that water issues cannot be insulated from cross-border terrorism. On World Water Day on 22 March 2026, which coincides with the eve of Pakistan Day, in his official message, [Pakistan’s President Asif Ali Zardari](#), reiterating his country’s stand, said, “India’s decision to place the treaty in abeyance, disrupt hydrological data-sharing, impede agreed mechanisms and undermines both the letter and spirit of a long-standing international agreement that has governed equitable sharing of the Indus river system for over six decades.” Earlier, in an interview to [The Times of India](#), India’s Home Minister Amit Shah said, “No, it [IWT] will never be restored”.

The Indus River Basin has a total area of around [1.12 million square kilometres](#), which is distributed among four countries: Pakistan (47 per cent), India (39 per cent), China (eight per cent) and Afghanistan (six per cent). In Pakistan, the basin covers around 520,000 square kilometres, or 65 per cent of the territory; in India, it covers approximately 440,000 square kilometres, nearly 14 per cent the country; about 14 per cent of the total catchment area of the basin lies in China, covering just one per cent of the area of the country; and in Afghanistan, it accounts for 11 per cent of the country’s area. The basin’s population was around 320 million in 2025 and is likely to reach 380 million by 2050. Of the present [320 million people](#), 110 million people (35 per cent) live in India, 195 million (61 per cent) live in Pakistan, four per cent in Afghanistan, while China has a negligible number of people living in the region. It is estimated that 80 per cent Pakistanis and eight per cent Indians live within the Indus Basin region. On the economic front, [Hunt et al.](#) argue that, given its vast hydropower potential, the Indus basin could emerge as a major player in both Asia’s and the global energy sectors.

Between [India and Pakistan](#), the eastern rivers – Satluj, Beas and Ravi – have an average annual flow of about 33-million-acre feet (MAF), and the western rivers – the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab – have an average flow of around 135 MAF. Under the IWT, India was allocated exclusive use of [water from the eastern rivers](#) – Bhakra Dam on Satluj, Pong and Pandoh Dam on Beas and Thein (Ranjitsagar) on Ravi, together with Beas-Sutlej Link, Madhopur-Beas Link, Indira Gandhi Nahar Project, have helped India to use around 95 per cent of the waters from the eastern rivers. To stop the flow of around two MAF from Ravi River into Pakistan, [India relies on projects](#) such as Shahpurkandi, Ujh and the second Ravi Beas Link.

On the [western rivers](#), after suspending the IWT, in an effort to utilise its share of the water mandated under the IWT and increase storage capacity, India completed sediment-flushing on the Baglihar, Salal and Dulhasti hydroprojects on the Chenab and accelerated the construction of hydro infrastructure. [Work on projects](#) such as Pakal Dul (1,000 megawatt [MW]), Kiru (624 MW), Kwar (540 MW) and Ratle (850 MW) – all on Chenab River – has been accelerated. Other [hydroelectric projects](#), such as Sawalkote (1,856 MW), Bursar (800 MW), Kirthai I (390 MW) and Kirthai II (930 MW), are also making progress.

Due to these projects, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) – an Indian Union Territory – may see a 46-per cent increase in [installed hydropower capacity](#) by the end of this year. Currently, J&K has a total installed hydropower capacity of 3,540.15 MW, which is expected to rise to 5,164.15 MW by December 2026, after the commissioning of Pakal Dul and the Kiru. Work on the 12 MW Karnah hydel project is also expected to be completed by the end of June 2026. It is estimated that J&K has a hydropower potential of around 18,000 MW, of which about 15,000 MW has been identified. Of this, only 3,540.15 MW has been harnessed so far.

The impact of climate change on the Indus basin is also intensifying. In their study, [Khan et al.](#) find that between 2001 and 2021, the basin experienced a net loss of 24.8 per cent in perennial snow and ice cover. As a result, a widening gap between water demand and supply and strained bilateral ties risks exacerbating tensions between the two South Asian nuclear powers.

Whatever the circumstances, even historically hostile riparian states have found ways to cooperate when a conducive political environment is fostered through committed leadership, consensus among power elites and support from institutions and the public. The IWT, which was in operation for more than six decades before being placed in abeyance, stands as a notable example. Signed in a [“a spirit of goodwill and friendship”](#), it endured for many years between countries that have faced persistent tensions since 1947.

.....

Dr Amit Ranjan is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at isasar@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.