

The Indus Waters Treaty: an exemplar of cooperation



*The Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 shows how international mediation can be instrumental in reaching an agreement between India and Pakistan. With this in mind, India and Pakistan should use the treaty as a model to negotiate, cooperate and resolve other ongoing issues as well, writes **Saud Sultan**.*

With the partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947, the Indus basin was also divided into two parts, with the upstream riparian (the area surrounding the river and its banks) belonging to India and the downstream belonging to Pakistan. Although the Boundary Commission Awards of 1947 demarcated the boundary between Pakistan and India, it did not define how the waters of the Indus system of rivers would be used by the two new dominions. Therefore, it was left to the governments of India and Pakistan to decide how this water would be shared. (see [Gulhati, 1973](#), p.56-57)

To settle this issue, from 1948 onwards, both countries had several bilateral negotiations, but, to their dismay, no agreement was reached. In 1952 the World Bank acted as a mediator to help both the countries resolve this issue. The Bank gave its proposal in 1954, which was accepted by India but rejected by Pakistan because it felt the proposal did not provide enough water storage to meet irrigation uses in Pakistan. Finally, in 1960, after negotiations and amendments to the initial Bank proposal, an agreement was reached between India and Pakistan. This was the Indus Waters Treaty, which crucially, marked the end of a critical and long-standing dispute between India and Pakistan.

India and Pakistan did manage to compromise and cooperate in order to implement the terms of the Indus Waters Treaty. For instance, in addition to some exceptions, the [terms](#) of the treaty generally stated that the waters of the three Western Rivers, namely Indus, Jhelum and Chenab, would be available for the unrestricted use of Pakistan; and India was granted unrestricted use of the waters of the three Eastern Rivers – Sutlej, Ravi and Beas. This obliged both the neighbouring countries to cooperate and allow the flow of the waters of the rivers that lay in their territory but even though their water was to be used by the neighbouring country.

Another term of the Treaty was the [Transition Period](#) of ten years, from 1st April 1960 to 31st May 1970, to construct a replacement for the water supplies from the Western Rivers for those irrigation canals in Pakistan that were previously dependent on the Eastern Rivers. This Transition Period did not only mean that India and Pakistan had to cooperate for ten or more years, but it also meant that India had to contribute financially towards the cost of this replacement work in Pakistan. Hence, as required, India transferred 62,060,000 Pound Sterling in ten equal annual instalments to the Indus Basin Development Fund (IBDF), which was administered by the World Bank ([Gulhati, 1973](#), p.384).



View of the Indus river from Karakorum highway, Pakistan. Image credit: Joonas Lyytinen, [Wikimedia Commons](#), [GNU free documentation licence](#).

It is important to analyse why, despite having strained relations with each other, the two countries cooperated with regard to the treaty. One of the factors is that since both India and Pakistan received financial support from the World Bank, or the IBDF, they were willing to cooperate. This was especially true because capital was required to finance the construction of storage facilities and the irrigation link canals in [Pakistan](#). In addition, the mediation of the World Bank was instrumental because both the countries, having already fought one war in 1947-48, lacked trust between each other. By applying the 'water rationality' principle, [Alam](#) argues that both India and Pakistan cooperated because they wanted to secure the water supply in the long-term. Since water is scarce and vital to both India and Pakistan, their cooperation, in contrast to waging war over it, was a much better option to build the infrastructure for future water use.

In more recent times, there have been instances of disagreements that have threatened the treaty. For example, Pakistan opposed the [Baglihar](#) hydropower project, on the river Chenab, undertaken by India. The Baglihar dispute was then taken to the World Bank and a neutral technical expert, Raymond Lafitte, was appointed to resolve it. [Lafitte](#) gave his decision in 2007 and the dispute was eventually solved as both India and Pakistan agreed to it. Similarly, a few years ago, mistrust between Pakistan and India re-occurred when Pakistan accused India of reducing the water flow downriver, as India planned to build the Kishan-Ganga hydroelectric project and Wullar [barrage](#). (also see [Mirza](#)) Nevertheless, despite these concerns, the treaty continues to exist in the present time. Regarding the success of the treaty, [Sahni](#) states:

"The Indus Water Treaty set a precedent of cooperation between India and Pakistan that has survived three wars and other hostilities between the two nations."

To conclude, with a history of protracted rivalry, the Indus Waters Treaty is a rare example of compromise and cooperation between India and Pakistan. The treaty shows how international mediation can be instrumental in reaching an agreement between the two countries which have strained relations with each other. With this in mind, India and Pakistan should use the treaty as a model to negotiate, cooperate and resolve other ongoing issues as well.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author



Saud Sultan graduated from the University of Cambridge with an MPhil in Modern South Asian Studies. His research interests include the Kashmir issue, the 1947 partition and India-Pakistan relations.