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Rivers as Leverage

India's Suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty and the Logic of Hydro-Coercion in South Asia

A study of India's systematic violation of the Indus Waters Treaty, the escalation risks it creates for a nuclear region, and the case for international mediation

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Foreword

South Asia is home to over two billion people in eight independent and sovereign countries. The two larger states, India and Pakistan, are nuclear-armed states whose relationship is complex and riddled with wars and conflicts. However, for 65 years, at least one agreement has sustained its relevance and stood apart from every war, crisis, and diplomatic freeze between India and Pakistan. The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) of 1960 kept the region's most vital resource, the water of the Indus River system, outside the battlefield. Soldiers fought in 1965, 1971, and 1999. Diplomats were expelled and recalled. Trade collapsed and recovered. Through all of it, the water kept flowing, and the two Indus Commissioners kept meeting.

However, that firewall has now been breached. In April 2025, after a terrorist attack at Pahalgam, the Government of India announced that it would hold the IWT in abeyance. What began as a gesture of anger has hardened into a settled policy. India's most senior ministers now state openly that the treaty will never be restored. One of its two parties has abandoned the treaty's machinery, the data exchange, the Permanent Indus Commission, and the dispute settlement bodies. Water, the one subject both countries agreed to keep separate from their quarrels, has become an instrument of coercion.

London Dialogue commissioned this report because we believe the significance of this development is not yet fully understood outside the region. The suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty is not a technical dispute about dams and pondage. It tests whether treaties survive when powerful states find them inconvenient. It is a live experiment in using a river as a weapon against a downstream population of nearly a quarter of a billion people. And it is unfolding between two states that hold, between them, some three hundred and sixty nuclear warheads, and that fought a four-day air and missile conflict as recently as May 2025.

This report is critical of the policy choices made in New Delhi, and it explains why. It also examines Pakistan's weaknesses, including decades of poor water management and a fragile domestic political scene. It is not meant to assign blame for its own sake. It aims to show, calmly and with evidence, how a water dispute can climb the ladder toward war between nuclear powers and what the international community can still do to stop that climb.

The views expressed are those of the author. London Dialogue publishes this report as part of its South Asia Security Programme, hoping it will inform policymakers, researchers, and the interested public in the United Kingdom (UK) and beyond.

Preface

This report grew out of a simple question that I have been asked many times since April 2025, in seminar rooms in London and at conferences in the Gulf and Europe. The question is: can a water treaty really cause a nuclear war?

The honest answer is that no treaty causes war by itself. Wars are caused by decisions that-are made by governments under pressure. But institutions shape those decisions. They slow governments down, give them information, and offer them ways to retreat without humiliation. The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) was one of the most effective of these institutions in South Asia. Its suspension does not make war certain. It makes war easier. That distinction runs through every chapter of this report.

Three convictions have guided the writing. First, evidence matters more than emotion. This subject attracts loud voices on both sides of the border. Wherever possible, I have relied on primary and institutional sources: the Court of Arbitration at The Hague's awards, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's estimates, the analysis of established research centres, and the public statements of the two governments themselves.

The second conviction is that criticism must be precise. This report strongly criticises the Modi government's decision to suspend the treaty and the wider political style that produced it. That criticism is made openly and is supported with documented evidence, including the findings of international human rights organisations. At the same time, the report does not pretend that India has no grievances or that Pakistan's conduct has been beyond question. India's concerns about cross-border terrorism are real and are stated fairly. A critical report that hides the other side's case is not analysis. It is propaganda, and it persuades no one who wasn't already persuaded.

The third conviction is that the world still has agency. The treaty emerged from international mediation. The World Bank brokered it and remained a party to its procedures. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has formally taken up the matter. The May 2025 ceasefire showed that outside powers, especially the United States (US), can still pull the two countries back from the edge. Chapter Nine argues that the guarantors and friends of this treaty have both the standing and the duty to act before the next crisis, not during it.

The report is written in plain language. Water politics and nuclear strategy are both full of technical terms, and I have tried to explain each one the first time it appears. A general reader should be able to follow the whole argument. A specialist will find the sources in the footnotes, prepared in accordance with the Chicago Manual of Style, eighteenth edition.

I am grateful to colleagues across London Dialogue's programmes for comments on earlier drafts and to the many officials and researchers in several countries who shared their views on the condition that they would not be named. Responsibility for the judgements and for any errors is mine alone.

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London, October 2026

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Executive Summary

The problem. On 23 April 2025, one day after the Pahalgam attack in which 26 civilians were killed, India announced that it would hold the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) in abeyance until Pakistan credibly and irreversibly ended support for cross-border terrorism. Within two weeks, the two countries fought a four-day military conflict involving missile strikes, air battles, and attacks on air bases deep inside each other's territory. A ceasefire was reached on 10 May 2025 with American involvement. However, the treaty was not restored. Through 2026, India's External Affairs Minister, Water Resources Minister, and Home Minister have all confirmed that the abeyance stands, with the Home Minister saying the treaty "will never be restored". Pakistan calls the treaty fully operational and binding, has taken the matter to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and has warned publicly that it would treat any attempt to stop its waters as an act of war.

What this report argues. The report examines India's actions as hydro-coercion, using an upstream position on a river to pressure a downstream state. It reaches five main findings.

First, coercion is currently more symbolic than real, but it is becoming real. The treaty limited India to run-of-the-river projects on the three western rivers, with very little storage. India today cannot hold back the roughly 135 million acre-feet that flow into Pakistan each year; its total permitted storage on those rivers is about 3.6 million acre-feet. The much-publicised flow interruptions in May 2025 lasted at most a few days. The danger lies in the trajectory. India has accelerated a chain of projects on the Chenab, including Ratle, Pakal Dul, Kiru, Kwar, and Dulhasti Stage II, and has advanced diversion schemes such as the Chenab-Beas link. Over five to ten years, these works will give India greater control over flow timing, especially in the dry season, when timing is everything for Pakistani agriculture.

Second, the policy damages India more than it damages Pakistan. Legally, India now openly defies the treaty's own Court of Arbitration, which ruled in June 2025 that the treaty contains no provision for unilateral abeyance and in May 2026 that it places firm limits on India's water-control abilities. Diplomatically, India has handed Pakistan a strong legal narrative at the Security Council, where Pakistan sits as an elected member. Economically, a permanent confrontation with a nuclear neighbour raises India's risk premium and works against its ambition of sustained high growth. Strategically, India is teaching a lesson it will not enjoy learning from others: India is itself a downstream state on rivers that rise in Chinese-controlled territory.

Third, the Modi government's domestic politics drives the policy and makes retreat difficult. The suspension is popular at home and fits a governing style built on Hindu majoritarian nationalism practicing Hindutva philosophy, muscular responses to Pakistan, and the framing of Muslims, inside and outside India, as a threat. Documented hate speech against minorities in India rose from 668 incidents in 2023 to 1,318 in 2025, most of them in states governed by the ruling party. A government that has staked its prestige on the slogan that blood and water cannot flow together has left itself little room to restore the treaty without appearing weak. This is the classic shape of a commitment trap.

Fourth, the nuclear factor cannot be ignored, and it is worsening. India and Pakistan held an estimated 190 and 170 warheads, respectively, in January 2026, and both are adding new delivery systems, sea-based weapons, and multiple-warhead missiles that shorten decision time in a crisis. Pakistan's nuclear doctrine exists precisely to protect the state against threats it cannot meet by conventional means, and its officials have repeatedly placed water in that category. The May 2025 conflict showed that both sides believe they can strike each other's territory and manage the escalation. That belief is the single most dangerous idea in South Asia

today. The report traces a realistic pathway in which a dry-season flow crisis, a strike on water infrastructure, and compressed decision timelines combine to carry a limited war toward a full-scale one, and from there toward possible nuclear use, no matter how limited it could be. The pathway is not a prediction. It warns that probabilities are moving in the wrong direction.

Fifth, international mediation is not optional; it is built into the treaty itself. The IWT is not a purely bilateral bargain. The World Bank negotiated it, signed it for specified purposes, and appointed its neutral experts and arbitrators. Pakistan has formally approached the Security Council (SC). The United States (US) showed in May 2025 that it retains decisive crisis influence. The report sets out a staged mediation plan: quiet resumption of hydrological data-sharing as a humanitarian measure; a face-saving parallel process that addresses India's terrorism concerns and the treaty's genuine need for climate-era modernisation; and a return of both parties to the treaty's dispute machinery. It also recommends practical steps for the United Kingdom(UK), the Gulf states, and China, each of which holds specific leverage.

The bottom line. India's suspension of the IWT is a strategic blunder by the Modi government in an attempt to project power. It delivers modest pressure on Pakistan today at the price of dismantling the one institution that kept water out of South Asia's wars. However, both countries' arsenals are growing, and their threshold for using force is falling. If the abeyance becomes permanent and India's storage capacity matures, a future water crisis will be harder to stop than the May 2025 crisis. Some ladders are easier to climb than to descend. As the treaty's guarantor, the international community should act now, while the climb can still be prevented.

List of Acronyms

BJP Bharatiya Janata Party

CPEC China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

DGMO Director General of Military Operations

IWT Indus Waters Treaty

JeM Jaish-e-Mohammed

LeT Lashkar-e-Taiba

LoC Line of Control

MEA Ministry of External Affairs

NSC National Security Committee

SC Security council

TTP Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan

UK United Kingdom

UN United Nations

UNSC United Nations Security Council

US United States

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Scope

This report examines the most serious challenge the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) has faced in its 65-year life: India's unilateral suspension in April 2025 and the consequences of that suspension for peace in South Asia and beyond. The report has one central claim. India's decision to hold the treaty in abeyance is best understood as hydro-coercion, the deliberate use of an upstream position on a shared river to pressure a downstream state. Judged politically, within India, the policy has been a success. Judged strategically, diplomatically, legally, and economically, it is counterproductive because of an impending cost that still lies ahead. The gravest of those costs is a rising risk that a future crisis over water will escalate through conventional war toward possible nuclear use.

The report is deliberately light on history. The treaty's negotiation between 1951 and 1960 has been told many times and is summarised here in a few pages, only as far as needed to understand the present situation. The weight of the report falls instead on the period since April 2025 and on the future: how the abeyance works in practice, what India can and cannot actually do to Pakistan's water, why the policy has taken the shape it has under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, how Pakistan has responded and may respond, how a water crisis could climb toward nuclear war, and what the international community, as the treaty's guarantor, can do to prevent that outcome.

1.2 The Argument in Outline

The argument proceeds in seven steps:

First, the treaty was never a friendship pact. It was a separation-of-assets agreement between two states that did not trust each other. So, it was designed to keep the water flowing even when everything else failed. That design worked through three wars. Its genius was replacing trust with rules, data, and outside referees. Suspending it does not merely pause cooperation. It removes the referee from a game that has become steadily rougher.

Second, India's current ability to hurt Pakistan through water is limited, and the treaty itself is the binding constraint. The treaty confined India to run-of-the-river hydropower plants on the western rivers, with limited storage. The dramatic headlines of May 2025, when India briefly held back water at the Baglihar dam, described a gesture, not a stranglehold. But India has now begun to build the infrastructure that would convert gesture into grip. That construction

programme, examined in Chapter Three, is the real story of the abeyance, and it operates on a timescale of five to ten years.

Third, the abeyance has placed India outside the law of its own treaty. The Court of Arbitration at The Hague has ruled that the treaty contains no provision for unilateral abeyance and has continued to issue awards that India rejects as null and void. Chapter Four shows that this posture is costly for a country that presents itself as a responsible rising power and a claimant to permanent membership of the Security Council (SC).

Fourth, the policy cannot be separated from the character of the government that made it. Chapter Five offers a critical analysis of the Modi government's political style: its Hindu majoritarian ideology, usually referred to as Hindutva, its record on minorities, its use of confrontation with Pakistan as an electoral instrument, and the way this style has narrowed India's own room for manoeuvre. The analysis is critical but well evidenced, drawing on documentation from international human rights bodies and independent research groups.

Fifth, Pakistan's stake in the Indus is existential in the plain meaning of the word. Chapter Six sets out the numbers: the share of Pakistan's population, food, employment, and export earnings that depends on a single river system whose headwaters lie in territory controlled by its principal adversary, India. It also examines, Pakistan's own contribution to its water insecurity, and why Pakistan's comparatively restrained response so far reflects temporary political weakness rather than acceptance.

Sixth, the nuclear dimension is not background colour. It is the heart of the matter. Chapters Seven and Eight show how the May 2025 conflict changed the escalation environment, how both arsenals and doctrines are evolving, and how a water crisis differs from a terrorism crisis in ways that make it more dangerous, not less. A terrorist attack is an event; a water cut-off is a condition. Events pass. Conditions grind on, and they engage in survival interests that nuclear doctrines exist to protect.

Seventh, the world must not remain a spectator, because the treaty was born of international mediation and carries the World Bank's signature. The Security Council has been formally seized of the dispute. Chapter Ten argues that the treaty's guarantors and friends have both standing and leverage, and it sets out a staged plan for using them. Chapter Eleven gathers the report's recommendations.

1.3 Terms Used in This Report

A few terms recur and are defined here in plain language.

'Abeyance' is the word India uses to describe its action on 23 April 2025. The term does not appear in the treaty or in the general law of treaties. India has not said it is withdrawing from the treaty. It says it is holding the treaty in suspension until Pakistan meets India's conditions on terrorism. Pakistan, the Court of Arbitration, and most legal commentators consider the treaty to remain fully in force.

Hydro-coercion means the use, or threatened use, of control over shared water to force political concessions from another state. It covers actual interference with flows, the construction of infrastructure that enables interference, and withholding data, a downstream state needs to manage floods and droughts.

'Run-of-the-river' describes a hydropower plant that generates electricity from a river's natural flow without storing significant water. The treaty permits India to build such plants on the western rivers, subject to strict design limits, precisely so that India cannot use them to control what reaches Pakistan.

Pondage is the small working reserve of water behind a run-of-the-river dam. How much pondage India may keep has been one of the central legal battles of the last decade and was the subject of the Court of Arbitration's award of May 2026.

Pakistan is allocated the western rivers: the Indus, the Jhelum, and the Chenab. **The eastern rivers** are the Ravi, the Beas, and the Sutlej, allocated to India.

The escalation ladder is a standard image in strategic studies for the sequence of steps by which a confrontation can intensify, from diplomatic pressure through limited force to general war and, between nuclear states, to possible nuclear use. The image is useful provided one remembers that real crises do not climb ladders neatly. They jump rungs.

1.4 Sources and Method

The report relies on primary and institutional sources throughout: the text and awards of the treaty's dispute bodies, the publications of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Institute of South Asian Studies in Singapore, established human rights organisations, official statements of the two governments, and reporting of record. Citations follow the Chicago Manual of Style, eighteenth edition, in footnotes. No encyclopedic or crowd-sourced references are used. Where estimates differ between sources, the more conservative figure is used and the difference is noted. The analysis of future escalation in Chapters Seven and Eight is scenario-based; scenarios are tools for disciplined thinking about risk, not predictions.

1.5 Key Judgements at a Glance

For readers who must brief others, the report's core judgements are stated here in one place, in plain declarative form. Each is developed and supported in the indicated chapters.

India cannot stop Pakistan's water today but is building the ability to manipulate its timing within five to ten years (Chapter Three). The abeyance is unlawful under the treaty, and India is losing every ruling it boycotts (Chapter Four). A domestic political style that profits from confrontation drives the policy and has trapped both governments in public commitments (Chapter Five). Pakistan's restraint is temporary, and its own water mismanagement is transferring leverage to India (Chapter Six). The May 2025 war normalised deep strikes between nuclear states and bred a false confidence that escalation is manageable (Chapter Seven). Water uniquely engages all four thresholds of Pakistani nuclear doctrine, and the guardrails that contain terrorism crises do not cover water (Chapter Eight). The precedent endangers India itself on the Brahmaputra and weakens downstream protection worldwide (Chapter Nine). Mediation is legitimate, historically effective in this rivalry, and has a natural opening around the Neutral Expert award expected at the end of 2026 (Chapter Ten). The opening moves belong to the World Bank and the United States, not to the parties (Chapter Eleven).

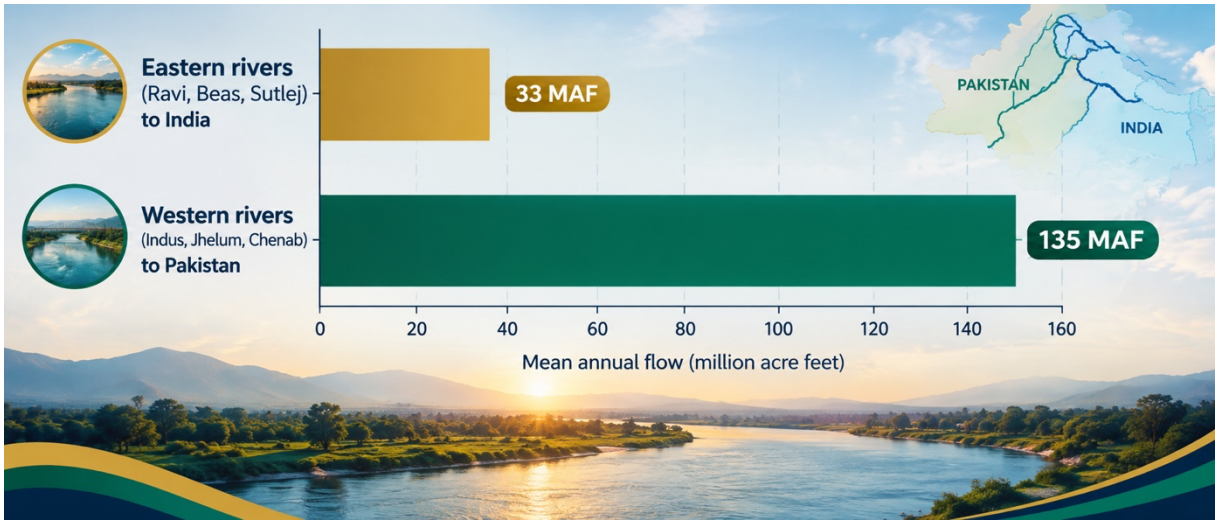
Chapter Two: The Treaty and Its Suspension

2.1 A Divorce Settlement That Worked

Partition in 1947 cut an integrated irrigation system into two. The canal headworks that watered Pakistani Punjab lay on the Indian side of the new border, and in April 1948 East Punjab briefly stopped the flow to demonstrate the fact. That single episode taught Pakistan a lesson it has never forgotten and set the terms of everything that followed. After nine years of World Bank-mediated negotiation, India and Pakistan signed the IWT at Karachi on 19 September 1960.

The treaty's design was unusual and deserves attention because it is exactly what India's abeyance now attacks. Rather than sharing each river, the treaty divided the system. India received the three eastern rivers, the Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej, with a mean annual flow of about 33 million acre-feet. Pakistan received the three western rivers, the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab, with about 135 million acre-feet, roughly eighty per cent of the system's water, reflecting the far larger area of irrigated land downstream. India was obliged to let the western rivers flow, subject to defined, limited uses, the most important of which is run-of-the-river hydropower under strict design constraints: limits on pondage, restrictions on gates and outlets, and a prohibition on storage that could regulate flows into Pakistan.[1]

Figure 1. Division of the Indus River System Under the 1960 Treaty



Source: Author's elaboration based on David Michel, "Can India Cut Off Pakistan's Indus River Lifeline?" CSIS, 2025.

[1] 'Dar Writes to UNSC Seeking Action over India's Attempts to Alter River Flows', *The Express Tribune*, 19 June 2026, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2614017/dar-writes-to-unsc-seeking-action-over-indias-attempts-to-alter-river-flows. See also David Michel, "Can India Cut Off Pakistan's Indus River Lifeline?" *Center for Strategic and International Studies,* 1 May 2025.

Three features made the treaty durable. First, it needed almost no goodwill to operate. Each side knew its entitlement, and a Permanent Indus Commission of one commissioner from each country handled routine questions, exchanged hydrological data, and met even during wars. Second, it included a layered dispute system with outside referees: technical differences went to a Neutral Expert appointed through the World Bank, and disputes over treaty interpretation went to a seven-member Court of Arbitration. Third, the World Bank was not a witness but a signatory for specified purposes, with ongoing duties in appointing experts and arbitrators. The treaty survived the wars of 1965 and 1971 and the Kargil conflict of 1999. It is regularly described as the most successful water agreement in the modern world, and the description is fair.

It is also true, and should be said plainly, that the treaty has aged. It contains no climate provisions, though the basin lost roughly a quarter of its perennial snow and ice cover between 2001 and 2021. It set engineering standards based on 1950s technology. India formally requested renegotiation in September 2024, and Pakistan, fearing that any reopening would end in a worse deal, declined and asked India simply to comply.[2] Both positions were understandable. Neither was what came next justified.[3]

2.2 The Road to Abeyance, 2016 to 2025

The weaponisation of the treaty began before 2025. After the Uri attack of September 2016, Prime Minister Modi told a meeting on the treaty that "blood and water cannot flow together," and India suspended Permanent Indus Commission meetings for a period. After Pulwama in 2019, Indian ministers promised to stop Pakistan from receiving surplus water from the eastern rivers. In January 2023, India issued a formal notice seeking to modify the treaty, and in 2024 it called off Commission meetings altogether. Each step treated the treaty less as an obligation and more as a card. The Pahalgam attack of 22 April 2025, in which 26 civilians, mostly Hindu tourists, were killed at a tourist resort in Indian-administered Kashmir, provided the occasion for playing it. Responsibility was initially claimed by The Resistance Front, a group Indian officials link to Lashkar-e-Taiba; Pakistan denied involvement and offered to cooperate with an international inquiry.[4]

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[2] 'ISAS-Brief-1232.Pdf', https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/ISAS-Brief-1232.pdf.

3 Amit Ranjan, "The Indus Waters Treaty: A Year After the Pahalgam Terror Attack," ISAS Brief, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, 28 April 2026, citing Khan et al.

4 Ranjan and Donnellon-May, "Indus Waters Treaty, and India-Pakistan Ties: A Year after Pahalgam," *Geopolitical Monitor*, 25 May 2026.

On 23 April 2025, India announced that the treaty would be held in abeyance "with immediate effect, until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably abjures its support for cross-border terrorism."[5] Pakistan's National Security Committee (NSC) replied that any attempt to stop or divert Pakistan's waters would be treated as an act of war. Within two weeks, the two countries were fighting. On 7 May, India launched Operation Sindoor, missile and drone strikes on nine sites in Pakistan and Pakistani-administered Kashmir that India described as terrorist infrastructure. Pakistan replied with Operation Bunyan al-Marsoos against Indian military targets. Over four days, the two forces fought with missiles and drones, and on 7th May 2025, both air forces got engaged in the largest beyond-visual-range air battle in the subcontinent's history, and both sides struck air bases on the other's territory before a ceasefire took hold on 10 May, with intensive American involvement acknowledged by Washington and disputed by New Delhi. Chapter Seven returns to this conflict in detail, because its lessons govern the escalation analysis.

The point that matters here is what did not happen after the ceasefire. Diplomats returned, airspace reopened in stages, and the guns fell silent. The treaty stayed suspended. The abeyance, announced as a response to one attack, quietly became a permanent policy.

2.3 Entrenchment, 2025 to 2026

The record for the following fourteen months shows a steady hardening. In June 2025, the Court of Arbitration ruled that the treaty contains no provision for unilateral abeyance and reaffirmed its own competence; India rejected the award and called the court illegally constituted. In August 2025, the court issued an award on general interpretation; India rejected it. India's Home Minister Amit Shah had already told *The Times of India*, in June 2025, that the treaty "will never be restored".[6] In January 2026, Pakistan, an elected member of the SC for 2025 and 2026, convened an Arria-formula meeting at which its Permanent Representative called India's position a serious violation of international law. In March 2026, at a United Nations (UN) World Water Day event, India's Permanent Representative restated that abeyance would continue until Pakistan ended support for terrorism and pointed to the treaty's need for modernisation. In May 2026 the Court of Arbitration issued its award on maximum pondage, affirming, in Pakistan's reading, that the treaty places substantive limits on India's water-

[5] 'Transcript of Special Briefing by MEA (April 23, 2025)', https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings?dtl/39443/Transcript_of_Special_briefing_by_MEA_April_23_2025.

[6] 'India Says It Will "Never" Restore Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan | India-Pakistan Tensions News | *Al Jazeera*', https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/22/india-says-it-will-never-restore-indus-waters-treaty-with-pakistan.

control ability; India rejected it as null and void. In June 2026, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Water Resources Minister C. R. Patil confirmed the abeyance once more; Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif replied with an open threat of war; and Pakistan's Foreign Minister wrote formally to the President of the SC about two Indian projects on the Chenab system that Pakistan says are designed for diversion. Indian government sources have meanwhile denied reports of any Track II softening, insisting there will be no concessions.

Table 1 condenses this chronology.

Table 1. Chronology of Abeyance and Related Events, April 2025 to June 2026

Date	Development
22 April 2025	Pahalgam attack kills 26 civilians.
23 April 2025	India announces treaty held in abeyance.
24 April 2025	Pakistan warns stopping its waters will be treated as an act of war.
Early May 2025	Flow interruption at Baglihar; reservoir flushing operations
7 to 10 May 2025	Operation Sindoor and Operation Bunyan al-Marsoos; ceasefire on 10 May.
27 June 2025	Court of Arbitration: no provision for unilateral abeyance; India rejects award.
8 August 2025	Court of Arbitration award on general interpretation; India rejects it.
January 2026	Pakistan raises the treaty at UN Security Council Arria-formula meeting.
March 2026	India tells UN forum abeyance continues; treaty needs modernization.
15 May 2026	Court of Arbitration award on maximum pondage; India rejects it as null and void.
June 2026	Jaishankar and Patil confirm abeyance; Pakistan writes to UNSC President on Chenab projects.

Source: Compiled by the author from official statements and reporting cited in the text.

The pattern is unmistakable. What India presented in April 2025 as a conditional response to terrorism has become, in practice, an open-ended policy of treaty nullification, sustained at the highest political level and now entangled with India's rejection of the treaty's judicial organs. This report analyses that situation.

By the middle of July 2026 both capitals, New Delhi and Islamabad, had converted their positions into settled and, increasingly, institutionalised policy. On 3 July 2026, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) reaffirmed that its stance was consistent, and that the treaty would remain in abeyance until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably abjured cross-border terrorism. Three days later, on 6 July 2026, a Corps Commanders' Conference chaired by the

Chief of Army Staff issued a formal declaration invoking the NSC directive of 24 April 2025 and committing the Pakistani military to all measures necessary to secure the country's rightful share of water. The passage of the water question from ministers and diplomats to the military leadership on the Pakistani side, and its restatement as fixed policy on the Indian side, hardened the dispute in the weeks after this report's cut-off. Table 2 sets the two positions side by side.

Table 2. Official positions as of mid-July 2026

Dimension	India	Pakistan
Legal status of the treaty	Held "in abeyance"; framed as a sovereign act	Treaty remains in force; abeyance has no legal basis.
Condition for restoration	Pakistan must credibly and irrevocably end cross-border terrorism.	India must resume normal functioning without preconditions.
Arbitral forum	Court of Arbitration rejected as illegally constituted.	Court of Arbitration recognised; awards welcomed
Latest official signal	MEA reaffirmation of a consistent stance, 3 July 2026	Corps Commanders' declaration on water, 6 July 2026.
Escalation posture	Flows could be curtailed over time; build-out continues.	Diversion of allocated waters would be an act of war.
Preferred venue	Bilateral, on India's terms	Internationalisation, including the Security Council.

Source: Ministry of External Affairs (India); Inter Services Public Relations (Pakistan); Permanent Court of Arbitration; press reporting, June to July 2026.

2.4 Reading India's Legal Caution

One detail of India's conduct deserves attention before this chapter closes, because it reveals more than any speech. Despite the finality of its ministers' language, India has never denounced the treaty, invoked the Vienna Convention's grounds for termination or suspension, or stopped calling its action abeyance, a word with no legal meaning. Caution has a reason. Denunciation would put India's justifications before a legal test it would likely fail, would free Pakistan of its own obligations, including those restraining Pakistani works on the eastern rivers, and would forfeit India's standing in the very proceedings- the Neutral Expert process on Kishanganga and Ratle- that India itself initiated and may yet win points in. New Delhi, in short, wants the treaty legally alive and practically dead: alive enough to bind Pakistan and preserve Indian claims, dead enough to free Indian construction and punish Pakistani agriculture. This asymmetry is worth naming because it defines the negotiating problem. India is not seeking exit; it is seeking a treaty that operates in one direction. No downstream state can accept that, and no serious mediator should pretend the ambiguity is accidental. But the same ambiguity is also the door left open: a government that has avoided burning the legal bridge is a government

that knows it may need to walk back across it, and Chapter Ten’s staged path is designed for precisely that walk.

Chapter Three: The Anatomy of Hydro-Coercion

3.1 What India Can Do Today: Less Than the Headlines Say

Any serious analysis must begin with the physical facts, because the politics of this dispute run far ahead of the hydrology. On average, about 182 cubic kilometres of water flow from India into Pakistan through the Indus system each year, of which more than 170 cubic kilometres travel down the three western rivers. Against this enormous volume, the treaty allowed India a total of about 3.6 million acre-feet of storage on the western rivers, roughly 4.4 cubic kilometres, and even that entitlement has never been fully built.[7] India's dams on the Chenab and Jhelum, including Baglihar, Salal, and Kishanganga, are run-of-the-river plants. Water arrives, spins the turbines, and leaves. The pondage behind such dams can be held back for a day or two at most before the reservoir fills and the operator must either release water or stop generating electricity.[8]

This is why the celebrated episodes of May 2025 were signals rather than strangulation. When India stopped flow from the Baglihar dam as what officials called a short-term punitive action, the interruption was measured in hours and days. The Kishanganga plant on the Jhelum has active storage of just 0.0061 million acre-feet, enough to briefly disturb flows into the Neelum valley, not to threaten Pakistan's harvest. Independent Indian commentary conceded at the time that these were tactical gestures within an infrastructure deliberately designed, by the treaty, to make sustained coercion impossible.

Two genuine harms, however, began immediately, and they should not be minimised. The first is the data blackout. Under the treaty, India supplied Pakistan with continuous hydrological data: river levels, discharges, flood warnings. That flow of information has stopped. For a country whose 2022 floods affected 33 million people and caused 30 billion dollars of damage and loss, flying blind on the rivers is not an abstraction. The second is timing manipulation within existing works. Reservoir flushing at Salal and Baglihar, conducted without notice, can send sediment-heavy surges or brief shortfalls downstream at moments chosen for effect. Neither harm starves Pakistan. Both erode the predictability on which an irrigation economy runs, and both signal intent.[9]

7 Michel, "Can India Cut Off Pakistan's Indus River Lifeline?" CSIS, 1 May 2025.
8 David Michel, "Can India Cut Off Pakistan's Indus River Lifeline?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1 May 2025.
9 Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan Economic Survey 2022-23*, chapter 2, on the 2022 flood damage assessment.

3.2 What India Is Building: The Five-To-Ten-Year Threat

The abeyance's real significance is that, in New Delhi's view, it has removed the legal ceiling on what India may construct. Since April 2025, India has accelerated a portfolio of works on the Chenab basin, including the Ratle, Pakal Dul, Kiru, and Kwar projects, approved Dulhasti Stage II, resumed planning for Kishanganga II, and advanced diversion concepts including the Chenab-Beas link in Himachal Pradesh and a proposed tunnel to move Chenab water toward the Ravi-Beas basin. Individually, several of these are projects India might have pursued lawfully, with treaty-compliant designs. Collectively, pursued without treaty oversight, without data-sharing, and with designs Pakistan can no longer inspect or challenge, they amount to what one analyst has called a doctrine of full-spectrum upstream utilisation.[10]

The strategic mathematics of this build-out is about timing, not volume. India will never be able to impound a whole year's flow of the western rivers; the geography does not allow it, and the cost would be absurd. A mature network of storage, gated spillways, and diversion tunnels would allow control over when water arrives. Pakistani agriculture lives and dies by the calendar: wheat sowing in the rabi season in October and November, canal closures in January, and cotton and rice plantings in the kharif season from May. The dry months, when the Chenab may carry a tenth of its summer flow, are exactly when even modest Indian storage could delay water by weeks. A fortnight's delay at sowing time, imposed deliberately in a crisis, would do more political damage than a summer flood. That is what leverage over timing means, and it is what India is now purchasing.

Table 3 summarises the position.

Table 3. India's Present and Prospective Ability to Affect Western-River Flows

Capability	Today	In five to ten years
Stop total flow of western rivers	Least Likely	Least Likely
Interrupt flow for days	Most Probable at Baglihar, Salal, Kishanganga; largely symbolic	Routine, at multiple points
Manipulate dry season timing by weeks	Marginal	Realistic on the Chenab, partial on the Jhelum
Divert water permanently out of basin	Negligible	Meaningful if Chenab-Beas and related links proceed
Withhold flood and flow data	Already in effect	Already in effect
Flood pulses through unannounced releases	Limited	Larger with added storage

10 Afzal, *CounterPunch*, 29 May 2026. See also, "A Year after Operation Sindoor," Business Standard (Blueprint Defence), 10 May 2026; Saima Afzal, "Water Is Becoming the Next India-Pakistan Flashpoint," *CounterPunch*, 29 May 2026; "Dar Writes to UNSC," *The Express Tribune*, 19 June 2026.

Source: Author's assessment based on treaty design limits and CSIS (2025).

3.3 The Chenab Portfolio, Project by Project

Because so much of the coming decade turns on specific structures, the principal works deserve individual notice. The table below lists the projects most frequently cited in Pakistani objections and Indian announcements since April 2025, followed by comment on what each contributes to the leverage picture.

Table 4. Principal Indian Projects on the Chenab and Jhelum Systems

Project	River	Status, mid-2026	Why it matters downstream
Baglihar	Chenab	Operating	Gated spillway design; used for the May 2025 flow interruption and flushing operations
Salal	Chenab	Operating	Heavily silted; flushing releases sediment surges without notice
Kishanganga	Jhelum (Neelum)	Operating	Diverts Neelum water to the Jhelum, reducing flows to Pakistan's Neelum-Jhelum plant; subject of the 2013 award and current Neutral Expert process
Ratle	Chenab	Under construction, accelerated	Large, gated project; center of the pondage dispute decided in May 2026
Pakal Dul	Chenab (Marusudar)	Under construction	First significant Indian storage work on the Chenab system
Kiru and Kwar	Chenab	Under construction	Add cascade control on the main stem
Dulhasti Stage II	Chenab	Approved 2026	Approved unilaterally during abeyance; cited in Pakistan's June 2026 letter to the Security Council
Kishanganga II	Jhelum	Planning resumed	Extends diversion capacity on the Neelum
Chenab-Beas link	Chenab basin to Beas	Advanced planning, accelerated	Moves water out of Pakistan's allocated basin into India's; the first true diversion project

Source: Compiled by the author from Pakistani submissions and Indian project announcements, 2025 to 2026.

Reading the table strategically rather than technically, three features stand out. First, the concentration on the Chenab. The Chenab is the most controllable of the three western rivers from Indian territory, and it irrigates the heart of Pakistani Punjab; a leverage strategy built on

the Chenab maximises political pain per cubic metre. Second, the shift is kind, not just to degree. Baglihar-era projects manipulate timing within days; Pakal Dul begins genuine storage; the Chenab-Beas link would remove water from the basin altogether, which is the difference between squeezing a pipe and cutting it. Third, the procedural darkness. Under the treaty, each of these designs would have been notified to Pakistan six months before construction, with objections heard through the Commission and, if necessary, the Neutral Expert. Since April 2025 every design proceeds unseen. Pakistan learns of gates and capacities from tender documents and satellite imagery, which means Pakistani military planners, not Pakistani engineers, are now the primary readers of Indian dam specifications. The abeyance has not merely removed a legal check; it has transferred the file from the water ministries to the war ministries on both sides, and files rarely travel back.

3.4 The Data Blackout: Coercion's Quietest Instrument

Among the instruments of hydro-coercion, the least photographed is the most consequential today, and it deserves its own section. For 64 years the treaty obliged India to transmit a continuous stream of hydrological information to Pakistan: daily gauge readings, discharge data, advance notice of works, and, most vitally, flood warnings during the monsoon. This information cost India almost nothing to provide and was worth an incalculable amount downstream, because the operation of Pakistan's entire canal economy, the largest contiguous irrigation system on earth, depends on knowing what the rivers will do before they do it. Barrage operators set gate positions on forecasts. Provincial irrigation departments allocate canal turns on expected flows. Disaster authorities pre-position boats and evacuate villages on flood telemetry that begins at Indian gauging stations.

Since April 2025, that stream has been switched off, and switching it off required no engineering. The consequences arrive in three forms. The first is flood risk. Pakistan's exposure was demonstrated in 2022, when floods affected 33 million people; the warning time Indian data provided for Chenab and Sutlej flood pulses was measured in days, and it is gone. The second is operational waste. Deprived of upstream readings, Pakistani operators must run the system defensively, keeping reserves against surprises, which in a water-scarce basin means real losses of crop and power every season. The third is strategic ambiguity, the most dangerous of the three. Every shortfall on the Chenab now arrives unexplained. Was it weather, sediment flushing, reservoir filling at a new Indian project, or a deliberate signal? Before April 2025, the Permanent Indus Commission answered exactly this question within days. Now there is no one to ask, and Chapter Seven will show that this manufactured ambiguity sits at the very centre of

the escalation pathway. A state that blinds its adversary should not be surprised when the adversary assumes the worst; assuming the worst is what blind states do.[11]

It is worth stating the asymmetry plainly, because it exposes the policy's character. Restoring data-sharing would cost India nothing hydrological, legal, or military. It has not been restored because the blackout's purpose is psychological: to keep 240 million people aware, season after season, that their rivers now run on New Delhi's sufferance. That is not counterterrorism by any definition. It is the administration of fear, and fear, as the record of every rivalry shows, is a crop that yields escalation.

3.5 What the Build-Out Costs India

Hydro-coercion is often discussed as if it were free for the upstream state. It is not, and the accounting deserves a paragraph, because it strengthens the conclusion that the policy fails on its own terms. The Chenab cascade and the diversion links are projects in some of the most difficult construction geography on earth: young Himalayan rock, extreme sediment loads, and seismic zones four and five. The Chenab-Beas link alone costs roughly 26 billion rupees for under nine kilometres of tunnel, and the storage-capable projects run to multiples of that. These sums are being committed to work whose economic case was marginal under treaty constraints and whose new justification is leverage. Meanwhile, the same projects rise within the range of Pakistani missiles whose owners have publicly promised to destroy them, which means India is building, at great expense, a set of hostages. Every dam India completes on the western rivers is simultaneously an instrument of pressure on Pakistan and a target that pins Indian prestige to fixed coordinates. Strategists have a name for expensive assets that invite attack and cannot be moved: liabilities.[12]

India also faces an opportunity cost within its own water economy. The engineering talent, finance, and political attention now concentrated on coercive works in the Chenab basin are resources not spent on India's genuine water emergencies, the collapsing aquifers of Punjab and Haryana, the urban shortages of the peninsula, the east-flowing rivers' pollution. India has real water problems. Pakistan is not among their causes, and squeezing Pakistan solves none of them.

11 On the scale of the 2022 disaster, Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan Economic Survey 2022-23*, chapter 2.

12 Saima Afzal, "Water Is Becoming the Next India-Pakistan Flashpoint," *CounterPunch*, 29 May 2026, on project costs and the wider Chenab portfolio.

3.6 Why the Coercion Logic Fails on Its Own Terms

Set aside, for one chapter, law and morality, and judge hydro-coercion purely as strategy. It fails three tests.

It fails the test of effectiveness. Coercion works when the target can concede. India's stated demand is that Pakistan credibly and irreversibly end cross-border terrorism. No Pakistani government can prove a negative, and no concession Pakistan could offer would be verifiable to New Delhi's satisfaction, which means the pressure has no achievable end state. Coercion without an end state is not strategy. It is punishment on a loop, and punishment consolidates rather than softens the target. The May 2025 conflict, which rallied a divided Pakistani public behind its army and produced a field marshal's baton for the army chief, demonstrated the mechanism within a fortnight of the abeyance.[13]

It fails the test of proportion between gain and exposure. The near-term hydrological pressure India gains is, as shown above, modest. The exposure it accepts is not. India has made itself the first state in modern history to claim a right of unilateral abeyance over a major water treaty, in open defiance of the treaty's court. Every upstream state on earth has noticed, and the one that matters most to India sits north of the Himalayas. China controls the headwaters of the Brahmaputra and has approved the world's largest hydropower cascade at the river's great bend. India's ability to object rests entirely on downstream-protection norms that India is now busy demolishing on the Indus. The precedent will not stay in South Asia.

It fails the test of reversibility. Good strategy preserves options. The abeyance destroys them. Each month of data blackout makes Pakistani planners assume the worst. Each new gated spillway makes Indian assurances less credible. Each ministerial statement that the treaty will never be restored raises the domestic price of restoring it. India is converting a card it could once play, the implicit threat of treaty suspension, into a fixed position it cannot easily abandon, and fixed positions are where crises begin, and Pakistan's military has already taken a position to react physically against any infrastructure built on its waters. Now, this is an alarming situation between the two nuclear neighbours and needs an immediate redressal by the regional and international stakeholders.

13 Sachdeva, "A Year After Operation Sindoor," *The Diplomat*, 6 May 2026, on the conflict's unifying effect inside Pakistan.

3.7 Climate Hydrology: Leverage That Grows by Itself

One more layer completes the anatomy, and it involves no human decision at all. The basin's hydrology is changing in ways that amplify every mechanism described above. Between 2001 and 2021, the basin lost roughly a quarter of its perennial snow and ice cover, and the scientific expectation is a period of elevated melt-driven flows followed, as the glaciers thin past their tipping points, by long-term decline, with the monsoon becoming simultaneously more erratic and more violent. For the politics of coercion, it has three consequences. Variability rises, meaning more anomalies of exactly the kind that feed the three escalation pathways; every natural shortfall becomes an accusation, and every accusation is now unanswerable because the data channel is dead. The dry season lengthens and deepens in bad years, which raises the value of even modest Indian storage; climate change is, in effect, building India's leverage without India lifting a shovel. And flood peaks grow, making the withheld warning data more lethal with each monsoon. Abeyance, in other words, is a wasting policy in the precise sense: its danger compounds annually through processes no government controls. Those who counsel patience, on any side, should understand that the river is not waiting with them.[14]

3.8 Assessing Pakistan's Counter-Leverage

An anatomy of coercion must also weigh the target's counters, because coercion that invites an effective reply is worse than useless. Pakistan's options divide into four baskets. The legal basket, arbitration and the Security Council record have been examined and are performing well, but they change facts on the ground slowly, if at all. The kinetic basket is real and publicly advertised: Indian projects on the Chenab lie within easy range of Pakistani conventional missiles and standoff weapons, and the army chief's August 2025 dam-busting threat was a statement of targeting-priority policy, not rhetoric. The problem is that using it opens the Chapter Seven escalation pathway at rung four, with Pakistan cast as the initiator. The grey basket, sabotage, cyber operations against dam control systems, and support to unrest in the project areas offer deniability at the price of confirming every Indian narrative about Pakistani conduct, and cyber operations against gates and turbines are a domain were precedents, once set, will be visited on Pakistan's own automated barrages. The economic and diplomatic basket includes overflight denial, which imposed real costs on Indian carriers in 2019 and 2025, closure of ground lines to Indian trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia, and mobilisation of Gulf and Chinese pressure.

14 Ranjan, ISAS, 28 April 2026, citing Khan et al. on the 24.8 per cent loss of perennial snow and ice cover.

Two conclusions emerge. First, Pakistan is not helpless, which means Indian planners who model the abeyance as cost-free coercion are modelling the wrong country. Second, every effective Pakistani counter to law and diplomacy accelerates the very escalation this report warns of. Islamabad's rational strategy is therefore the one it has mostly followed so far: maximum legal and diplomatic pressure, with kinetic options held visibly in reserve; everyone else's rational strategy is to make that patience keeps paying, which is the burden of Chapter Ten.

The remainder of this report examines what this failed strategy has opened up: legal confrontation, political entrenchment, and, above all, escalation risk between two nuclear-armed states.

Chapter Four: The Legal Battlefield

4.1 Can a Treaty Be Held in Abeyance?

India's chosen word, abeyance, does important political work precisely because it is legally empty. The Indus Waters Treaty is unusual among international agreements in that it has no exit clause and no suspension clause. Article XII provides that the treaty continues in force until terminated by a duly ratified treaty concluded between the two governments for that purpose. In other words, it can end only by mutual consent. The general law of treaties, codified in the Vienna Convention, allows suspension in narrow circumstances, principally a material breach of the treaty itself by the other party or a fundamental change of circumstances. India has invoked neither ground formally. Cross-border terrorism, however grave, is not a breach of a water treaty, and India has been careful not to submit its justification at any forum that could rule on it.

The treaty's own court has now spoken to the question directly. In May 2025, the Court of Arbitration invited both parties to make submissions on what effect, if any, India's announcement had on the proceedings. India declined to participate, as it has throughout. In its Supplemental Award of 27 June 2025, the court held that the treaty does not provide for unilateral abeyance and that its own competence was unaffected. India rejected the award, describing the court as illegally constituted, a position it has maintained since the court was formed in 2023, objecting to parallel proceedings. The court proceeded regardless, issuing an award on general interpretation in August 2025, a clarification decision in November 2025, and, on 15 May 2026, its award on maximum pondage, which in Pakistan's reading confirms that the treaty places substantive limits on India's ability to control water through the design and operation of its plants.[15] India rejected that award too, as null and void.[16]

The legal position is therefore lopsided in a way rarely seen between major states. One party participates in the treaty's machinery and wins its rulings. The other boycotts the machinery, loses by default, and answers with adjectives. Whatever the merits of India's underlying grievances about the court's constitution, the optics are of a state that has decided law binds it only when convenient. For a country that aspires to permanent membership of the Security

15 *Award concerning Maximum Pondage*, PCA Case No. 2023-01, 15 May 2026; Press Release of the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the Supplemental Award Concerning Maximum Pondage, 5 June 2026.

16 Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Supplemental Award on the Competence of the Court*, PCA Case No. 2023-01, 27 June 2025.

Council and presents itself as a voice of the rules-based order, this is a self-inflicted wound, and Pakistan's diplomats have exploited it with skill.

4.2 The Guarantor Question

Pakistan describes the World Bank as the treaty's guarantor. The Bank resists the word. Its president said in 2025 that the Bank's role is merely to facilitate and that speculation about the Bank stepping in to fix the problem was, in his words, bunk. Both descriptions contain truth. The Bank is not a policeman and commands no divisions. But it is also more than a witness. It signed the treaty for specific purposes; it administers the appointment of Neutral Experts and members of the Court of Arbitration; it holds the Indus Basin Development Fund's legacy; and its procedures are why the dispute machinery has continued to function at all despite India's boycott. The Neutral Expert process on the Kishanganga and Ratle design questions, which India itself requested, continues, with an award expected by the end of 2026, and India has stayed away from its meetings since April 2025. The Bank's quiet duty now is to keep that machinery alive, because the parties will need it functioning when politics permits a return. Chapter Ten returns to what more the Bank and others can do.

4.3 The Security Council Dimension

Pakistan has moved the dispute steadily up the international agenda. In January 2026, it used its elected seat on the Security Council to convene an Arria-formula meeting on the treaty, where its Permanent Representative called India's position a serious violation of international law. In April 2026, Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar wrote to the Council's president warning of grave peace, security, and humanitarian consequences for the 240 million people who depend on the Indus system. In June 2026, Pakistan wrote again, highlighting two Chenab-system projects it says are designed for diversion and framing India's conduct as deliberate water weaponisation prohibited by international law. India's response at the United Nations has been to restate its terrorism conditions and to argue that the treaty needs modernisation for the climate era.[17]

The Council has taken no action, and none should be expected soon; the politics of the permanent five forbid it. But the record being built matters. Article 33 of the Charter obliges parties to a dispute likely to endanger peace to seek peaceful settlement, and Pakistan is

17 "India Reiterates Indus Waters Treaty to Remain in Abeyance until Pakistan Ends Support for Terrorism," *DD News* (Doordarshan, Indian state broadcaster), 20 March 2026. See also, "Dar Writes to UNSC Seeking Action over India's Attempts to Alter River Flows," *The Express Tribune*, 19 June 2026.

constructing a documentary case that it sought every peaceful avenue while India refused them all. If a future crisis over water turns violent, that record will shape how the world assigns responsibility, and India's lawyers know it.

4.4 The Wider Law of Rivers

Beyond the treaty itself stands a body of customary international law that would govern the two states even if the treaty vanished tomorrow, and it is worth setting out in plain terms, because Indian commentary sometimes implies that without the treaty India would be free to do as it pleases upstream. The foundational rule, recognised for over a century and codified in the United Nations (UN) Watercourses Convention of 1997, is equitable and reasonable utilisation: every state sharing a river is entitled to a fair share of its uses and obliged to respect others' fair shares. Its companion is the no-harm rule: a state must take all appropriate measures to prevent significant harm to other states sharing the watercourse. Neither India nor Pakistan is a party to the 1997 Convention, but its core rules are widely treated as customary law binding on all states, and India accepted their substance when it signed a treaty built upon them. A third strand comes from the law of armed conflict, which prohibits attacking, destroying, or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, expressly including irrigation works and drinking water installations, and gives special protection to dams whose destruction would release dangerous forces against civilians. Pakistan's letters to the Security Council (SC) invoke this architecture when they describe deliberate interference with the rivers as water weaponisation prohibited by international law.[18]

Two conclusions follow. The first is that the abeyance buys India less legal freedom than its advocates suppose: the treaty's specific limits may be defied in New Delhi's theory, but the customary duties of equitable use and no significant harm remain, and a diversion that devastated Pakistani agriculture would violate them regardless of the treaty's status. Second, the legal question and the escalation question in Chapters Seven and Eight are connected. Law alone does not stop wars, but shared legal expectations help make crisis signalling legible; when one party steps outside the framework, its adversary loses another way to predict its behaviour, and prediction is the raw material of restraint. A state that will not say what rules bind it should expect to be planned against as if none does.

18 *The Express Tribune*, 19 June 2026, summarising Pakistan's legal submissions on the prohibition of using water as a weapon against downstream populations.

4.5 The Neutral Expert Endgame of 2026

The Neutral Expert process on the design of the Kishanganga and Ratle plants, which India requested in 2015 as its preferred alternative to arbitration, has continued despite everything, and its award is expected by the end of 2026. India has boycotted the meetings since April 2025, but the proceedings it started will conclude regardless. If the Neutral Expert's technical findings favour Indian design positions, New Delhi will face a test of consistency: claiming victory would mean accepting the authority of treaty machinery India has spent two years calling defunct, while ignoring a favourable award would confirm that no outcome, however friendly, can satisfy a party that has rejected the game itself. If the findings favour Pakistan, they will join the growing file of arbitration awards India defies, but with an extra sting, because the Neutral Expert was India's own chosen forum. Either way, the end of 2026 offers mediators a natural moment: an authoritative technical document, produced by the treaty's least politicised organ, around which a face-saving Indian re-engagement could be constructed. Diplomatic calendars rarely provide such hooks. This one is visible eighteen months in advance, and Chapter Ten's stage one is timed with it in mind.[19] In short, India is losing the legal battlefield and losing by choice.

4.6 What Compliance Would Cost India: Nothing

A closing observation on the legal file, because it exposes the abeyance's character more clearly than any doctrine. Ask what India would materially lose by complying with the treaty while pursuing every legitimate objective it has declared. It could pursue counterterrorism by every military, intelligence, and diplomatic means; the treaty constrains no soldier. It could build every lawful hydropower project on the western rivers; the treaty permits them, and the Neutral Expert process India chose exists to certify the designs. It could press for modernisation through Article XII (3), where its climate arguments would find sympathetic audiences, including in this report. Beyond these lawful options, the practical content of abeyance is the ability to frighten a downstream population and to build works whose designs no one may inspect. That is the measure of what India's government has judged worth the wreckage of its legal standing: not security, which the treaty never impeded, but the pleasure of the threat. Legal analysis can establish that a policy is unlawful. Only the policy's own emptiness can establish that it is also unserious, and this one is both. The reasons for that choice lie in domestic politics, to which the report now turns.

19 Neutral Expert (Kishenganga and Ratle Hydroelectric Plants), Decision on Competence, January 2025; on the expected timing of the final determination, see "India Pauses Data Sharing and Meetings of the Permanent Indus Commission," The Water Diplomat, July 2026.

Chapter Five: The Modi Factor

5.1 Why This Chapter Is Necessary

States do not make policy; governments do. The abeyance of the Indus Waters Treaty is not an inevitable expression of Indian national interest. Previous Indian governments faced terrorism at least as murderous, including the Mumbai attacks of 2008, and chose to keep the treaty ring-fenced. The decision to breach the ring-fence belongs to a particular government with a particular ideology and method. Understanding that method is essential to judging whether the abeyance can be reversed and at what price. This chapter is critical of the Modi government, but every criticism is documented, and the chapter closes by stating fairly what can be said on the government's side.

5.2 Majoritarian Politics and the Uses of the Enemy

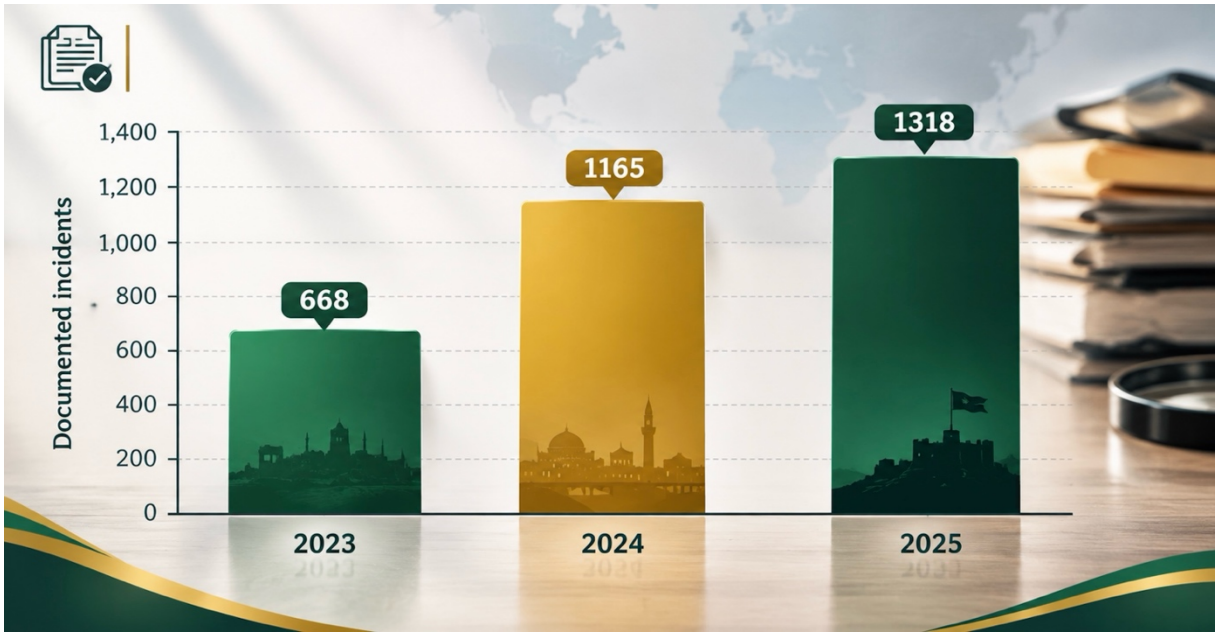
Narendra Modi has governed India since 2014 at the head of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political wing of a broader Hindu nationalist movement whose declared ambition is to refashion a constitutionally secular India around its Hindu majority. The record of that project is documented by the world's principal human rights organisations. Human Rights Watch found that the Prime Minister's own 2024 election campaign repeatedly used hate speech against Muslims and other minorities, inciting discrimination, hostility, and violence, and that a decade of such rhetoric has normalised abuses against Muslims and Christians. Amnesty International's reporting points in the same direction, citing a religion-based citizenship law that UN bodies have called fundamentally discriminatory, the demolition of Muslim-owned properties, and the removal of Muslim-majority Kashmir's constitutional autonomy in 2019.[20]

The trend line matters more than any single incident. India Hate Lab, a Washington-based research project, documented 668 anti-minority hate speech events in 2023, 1,165 in 2024, and 1,318 in 2025, an almost exact doubling in two years, with about 98 per cent targeting Muslims and the overwhelming majority occurring in states governed by the ruling party or its allies. The government rejects these findings as biased and points to welfare programmes that serve all communities. The volume and consistency of the documentation, across independent

20 Amnesty International, Amnesty International Report 2024/25: The State of the World's Human Rights, India chapter (London: Amnesty International, 2025); Amnesty International, "If You Speak Up, Your House Will Be Demolished": Bulldozer Injustice in India (London: Amnesty International, February 2024). See also, Human Rights Watch, "India: Hate Speech Fueled Modi's Election Campaign," 14 August 2024; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025*, India chapter.

organisations with different methods, makes the government's blanket denial difficult to credit.[21]

Figure 2. Documented Anti-Minority Hate Speech Events in India, 2023 to 2025



Source: India Hate Lab, Center for the Study of Organised Hate, reported by Reuters, 2026.

What has this to do with a water treaty? Everything, because Pakistan occupies a load-bearing place in this politics. In the majoritarian imagination the external Muslim enemy and the internal Muslim minority are two faces of one threat, and confrontation with the first licenses pressure on the second. Muscular action against Pakistan, the Balakot strike of 2019, the constitutional evisceration of Kashmir's status, Operation Sindoor, and now the water suspension are not foreign policies that happen to be popular. It is a governing technique. The abeyance was announced within twenty-four hours of Pahalgam, before any investigation could conclude anything, because its function was expressive before it was strategic. The slogan that blood and water cannot flow together, coined by the Prime Minister in 2016, was retrieved and repeated because it distils the technique into six words.

5.3 The Commitment Trap

The domestic success of this politics is precisely what makes it strategically dangerous. A government that wins elections by demonstrating hardness toward Pakistan cannot easily be seen to soften. The Home Minister has said the treaty will never be restored. The External Affairs Minister has attached restoration to the complete end of cross-border terrorism, a

21 India Hate Lab, *Hate Speech Events in India: Annual Report 2025* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Organized Hate, January 2026); reported by Reuters, 13 January 2026, and CNN, 10 February 2025.

condition no one can certify. Official sources dismiss even reports of Track II contact as misleading. Each statement narrows the exit. Analysts call this a commitment trap: leaders make public promises to gain credibility, and those promises then to bind them in circumstances they never anticipated. In the next crisis, an Indian government that has told its voters for years that water is a weapon will face pressure to use it, whatever its water ministry and armed forces advise. The trap is mutual, because Pakistan's leaders have promised war if the water is stopped. Two governments have now pre-committed to escalation over the same river. That is the strategic meaning of the hate politics documented above: it is not merely ugly; it removes flexibility exactly where flexibility prevents wars.[22]

A further cost inside India deserves notice. The abeyance has been accompanied by pressure on domestic dissent from the government's Kashmir and Pakistan policies, part of a wider pattern in which critics face prosecution under counterterrorism and financial regulations. A political system that punishes internal questioning of a policy loses the early warnings that internal questioning provides. Strategic blunders flourish in such systems.[23]

5.4 From Balakot to the Baglihar Gates: Confrontation as Electoral Technique

The pattern described above can be tested against the calendar, and the test is instructive. India's most dramatic actions against Pakistan cluster with remarkable regularity around Indian electoral cycles. The Balakot airstrike of February 2019 preceded the general election by weeks, and the ruling party's campaign made the strike its centrepiece; the Prime Minister asked first-time voters to dedicate their ballots to the pilots who had bombed Pakistan. Within months of the renewed mandate, the government revoked Kashmir's constitutional status. The 2024 campaign, as Human Rights Watch documented, was saturated with rhetoric presenting Muslims as infiltrators and Pakistan as their patron. The abeyance and Operation Sindoor of April and May 2025 arrived with state elections in Bihar on the horizon, and the government conferred the name of the operation on everything from railway stations to school curricula in the months that followed. None of this proves that any single decision was taken for electoral reasons alone; governments act from mixed motives, and the attacks that provoked the responses were real. The calendar shows that confrontation with Pakistan is never allowed to

22 "India Rules Out Any Indus Treaty Relief for Pakistan, Rejects Track II Reports," *Outlook India*, 30 June 2026.
23 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025*, India chapter.

remain mere policy in today's India. It is harvested systematically as political energy, and a valuable resource is never voluntarily retired.[24]

This is why the report treats the abeyance as durable rather than tactical. A policy adopted in anger can be reversed when anger cools. A policy that has become an electoral asset is reversed only when it stops winning votes, and water nationalism, unlike a troop deployment, costs the Indian exchequer little and the Indian voter nothing at all. The costs fall on Pakistani farmers, Indian credibility abroad, and the region's safety margins, none of which vote in Indian elections. Political scientists studying democratic backsliding describe this dynamic: external enmity substitutes for internal performance; India's slide in international democracy assessments over the past decade, noted by multiple indices, has tracked the externalisation of its politics. In short, the treaty was not suspended despite its value as the region's last firewall. Its value as a firewall is what made suspending it so demonstrative, and demonstration was the point.[25]

A final observation belongs here because it concerns the future rather than the past. The technique described in this chapter has an appetite. Each demonstration must exceed the last to produce the same effect: a surgical strike in 2016, an air strike in 2019, a four-day war in 2025, the water in perpetuity. Planners in every capital should ask what the demonstration after next looks like, because the ladder of gestures is climbing toward acts that cannot be undone, and Chapter Seven maps where it leads.

5.5 Kashmir: Where the Water and the Ideology Meet

No account of the abeyance is complete without naming the territory where its politics and its hydrology converge. Every Indian project discussed in this report stands in Jammu and Kashmir, and the western rivers gather their waters in the one part of the subcontinent whose status has been disputed since 1947. This is not a coincidence the analysis can pass over, because Kashmir is also where the Modi government's majoritarian project has been pursued in its most concentrated form.

In August 2019, the government revoked the constitutional autonomy that Jammu and Kashmir had held since accession, split the state into two centrally ruled territories, detained much of its political class, and imposed the longest internet shutdown ever recorded in a democracy.

24 Human Rights Watch, "India: Hate Speech Fueled Modi's Election Campaign," 14 August 2024.

25 On the deterioration of civic space and democratic indicators in India, see Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025*, India chapter, and the annual assessments of the V-Dem Institute (Democracy Report) and Freedom House (Freedom in the World).

Human rights organisations have documented the years since as a period of restricted assembly, press intimidation, and demographic anxiety fed by new domicile and land rules. The official justification was development and the end of terrorism. Pahalgam, six years later, showed the second claim at least to be hollow, and it is worth noting what the government's first responses to Pahalgam were: not an inquiry into the security lapse at a heavily administered tourist site, but the suspension of a water treaty and, within Kashmir, demolitions of homes and mass detentions.[26]

The hydro-political significance is twofold. First, within the majoritarian narrative, Kashmir's rivers are presented as Indian waters flowing wastefully to an enemy because of a treaty signed by the ideological adversaries of the current ruling movement; recovering the waters and dissolving autonomy are chapters of the same story of undoing 1947's settlements. This is why treaty revision was pressed from 2016 onwards, well before Pahalgam supplied the occasion, and why restoration is described as impossible rather than conditional. Second, the build-out carries a domestic constituency argument: Jammu and Kashmir's identified hydropower potential of some eighteen thousand megawatts, only a fifth of it harnessed, is invoked as development justice for the territory. The argument would carry more weight if the territory's own people had been consulted about becoming the forward infrastructure of a water confrontation and if the region's recent history suggested that revenue rather than control was the object.[27]

For Pakistan, the convergence completes a circle of grievance: the territory it disputes now hosts the works it fears, built by a government it watches strip that territory's Muslims of political voice. For third parties, the convergence carries a practical warning. Any future war over water will be fought in and over Kashmir, which means the escalation pathways of Chapter Seven inherit every hair-trigger of the Line of Control (LoC), and any mediation of the water dispute that pretends Kashmir does not exist will be built on sand. The treaty of 1960 succeeded precisely because it detached the water from the territorial dispute. The abeyance has re-attached them, which may be its single most reckless effect.

5.6 What Could Change the Calculus in New Delhi?

Critical analysis owes its subject a theory of change, and three routes are visible, listed from least to most likely. The first is principled reversal: a decision that the abeyance has failed and should be traded away; nothing in this government's record suggests it, and the commitment

26 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025*, India chapter, on restrictions in Jammu and Kashmir.
27 Development figures for Jammu and Kashmir hydropower are given in Ranjan, ISAS, 28 April 2026.

trap forbids it until at least the next general election. The second is elite recalculation under external price signals: Indian foreign policy has adjusted before when the costs to relationships it values, above all Washington and the technology and investment pipeline, were made explicit, and the recommendations to the US in Chapter Eleven are designed around exactly this channel. The third and most probable is repackaging: a face-saving construction in which India resumes data flows and technical participation as magnanimity, modernisation, or flood-safety cooperation, while quietly retiring the word 'abeyance' rather than formally revoking it. Mediators should aim for the third route and design every proposal so that it can be announced in New Delhi as a victory. Whether that is fair is not the question; whether it prevents a war is.

5.7 The Fair Statement of the Other Side

An honest report must state India's case at its strongest. India has suffered repeated mass-casualty terrorism traceable, in its assessment and that of many outside observers, to groups that have long enjoyed sanctuary in Pakistan. Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) did not invent themselves. Pakistan's own leaders have acknowledged the country's past in nurturing militant proxies, and its convictions of those responsible for attacks on India have been few and revocable. A state whose citizens are murdered at a tourist meadow is entitled to respond, and the frustration that ordinary Indians feel is genuine, not manufactured. The treaty is also old, the basin's hydrology is changing, and India's renegotiation proposals predate Pahalgam and address real problems.

None of this rescues the abeyance. A response to terrorism that punishes 240 million civilians through their water supply is collective punishment, not counterterrorism, and it strengthens the very army-centred politics in Pakistan that India says it wishes to weaken. A renegotiation case that might have won sympathy through the treaty's own modification article, Article XII (3), has instead been pursued by coercion, which guarantees Pakistani refusal. The Modi government has fused a legitimate grievance and a legitimate reform agenda into an illegitimate instrument. That is the precise nature of the blunder.

5.8 The Regional Diffusion of a Political Style

The hate politics documented in this chapter does not stop at India's borders, and its regional diffusion belongs in an assessment of regional risk. Political styles travel, especially successful ones, and showing that majoritarian enmity wins elections in the region's largest democracy has lowered the cost of imitation everywhere else. In Bangladesh, communal mobilisation and minority scapegoating have sharpened amid the political upheavals since 2024. In Pakistan, the

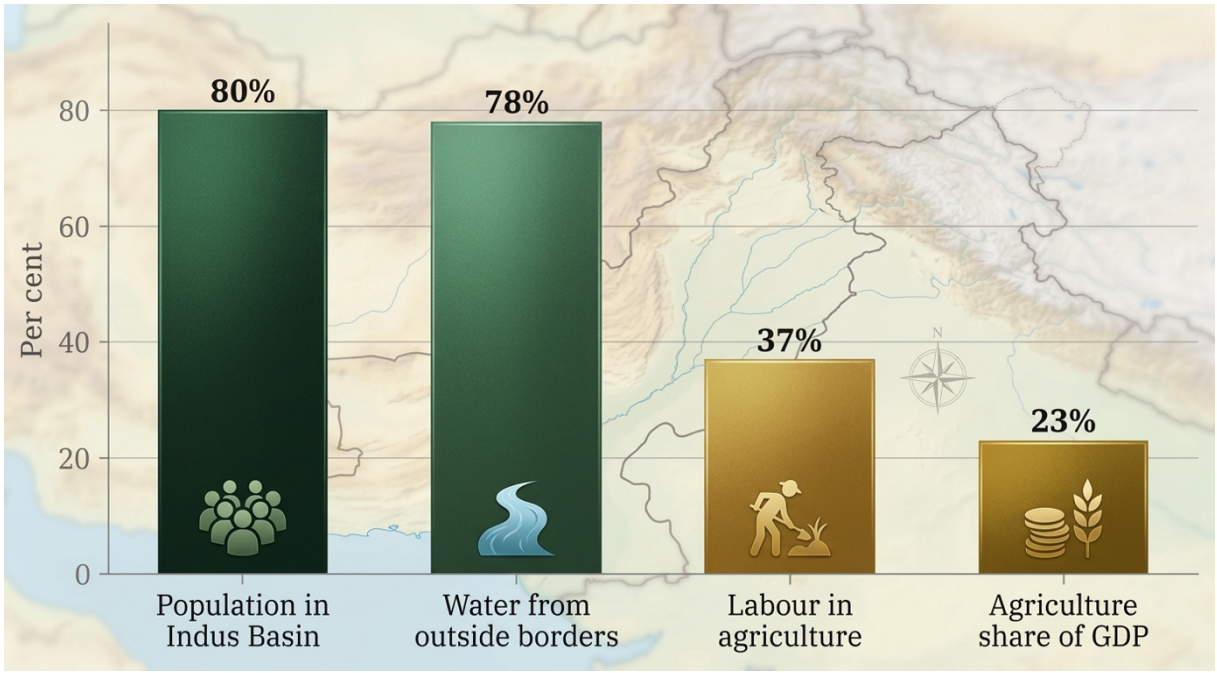
mirror dynamic operates as it always has: Indian majoritarianism is the best recruiting sergeant Pakistani religious hardliners possess, and every demolished mosque or lynching reported from India strengthens those in Pakistan who argue that coexistence was always an illusion, which in turn feeds the militancy that India cites as justification. In Kashmir, a generation is coming of age knowing India only as a security regime. And across the diaspora, from Leicester to New Jersey, imported communal tensions have produced street violence that police forces in third countries now plan for. The point for this report is not moral bookkeeping. The point is that the abeyance operates within an ecosystem where enmity is actively cultivated on all sides by political entrepreneurs who profit from it, and every mechanism of restraint examined in later chapters must work against that current. Institutions can be rebuilt in years. Publics taught to hate take generations to unteach, and the teaching, on present evidence, is accelerating.

Chapter Six: Pakistan's Stakes and Pakistan's Response

6.1 An Existential Dependence, in Numbers

The word 'existential' is overused in strategic writing. Here it is simply accurate. The Indus basin covers about 65 per cent of Pakistan's territory, and roughly 80 per cent of its people live within it. More than three-quarters of Pakistan's renewable water originates outside its borders, almost all of it in the Indus system, whose upper reaches lie in Indian-controlled territory. Agriculture accounts for around 90 per cent of the country's water withdrawals, contributes about 23 per cent of gross domestic product, employs roughly 37 per cent of the labour force, and drives most export earnings through cotton, textiles, and rice. The wheat crop that feeds the country is irrigated. The textile industry that clothes its export ledger begins in an irrigated cotton field. No version of Pakistan's economy, food supply, or social peace survives sustained disruption of the Indus.

Figure 3. Pakistan's Structural Dependence on the Indus System

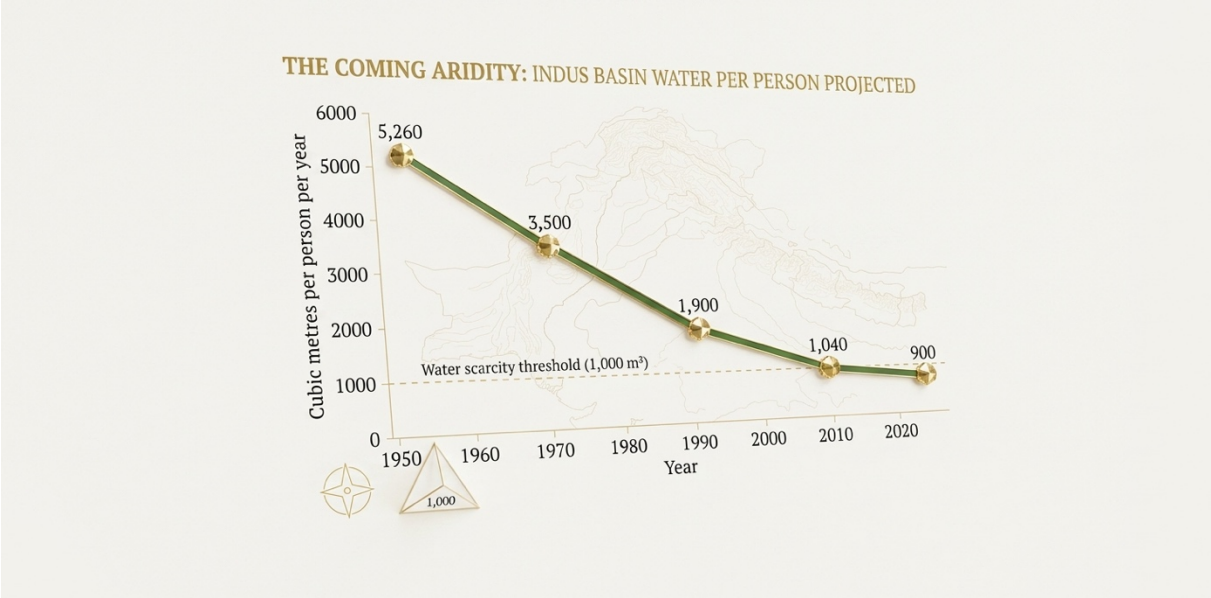


Source: Author's elaboration based on ISAS-NUS (2026) and CSIS (2025).

This dependence sits atop a water crisis that predates the abeyance and owes nothing to India. Per capita water availability has fallen from about 5,260 cubic metres in 1951 to roughly 1,000 cubic metres today, the conventional threshold of water scarcity, and continues to fall as the population grows. Storage capacity is about 30 days of average flow, among the lowest of any major irrigation economy. Canal losses are enormous, groundwater is being mined, and the 2022 floods showed what the basin's new climate volatility can do, affecting thirty-three million

people and causing damage and losses assessed at thirty billion dollars.28 Between 2001 and 2021, the basin lost about a quarter of its perennial snow and ice cover, which promises higher flows now and lower flows later in the century.[29]

Figure 4. Pakistan's Per Capita Water Availability, 1951 to 2025



Source: Author's elaboration based on *Water Policy* (2021) and national water assessments.

Two conclusions follow, and they cut in different directions. The first is that India's leverage grows automatically with time: every year of population growth and glacier loss makes a given interference with timing more painful. The second is that a large share of Pakistan's vulnerability is home-made, the product of decades of underinvestment, provincial quarrels over new reservoirs, and pricing that treats water as free. A Pakistani state serious about water security would treat the abeyance as the final argument for domestic reform. Chapter Eleven returns to this.

6.2 The Response So Far: Law, Diplomacy, and Warnings

Pakistan's response to the abeyance has moved along four tracks. The legal track has been the most successful: participation in the Court of Arbitration, which has produced the awards described in Chapter Four, and support for the continuing Neutral Expert process. The diplomatic track has used Pakistan's Security Council seat to internationalise the dispute

28 *Pakistan Economic Survey 2022-23*, chapter 2.

29 Ranjan, ISAS, 28 April 2026, citing Khan et al. See also, Water availability series summarised in Shahmir Janjua, Ishtiaq Hassan, Shoaib Muhammad, Saira Ahmed and Afzal Ahmed, "Water Management in Pakistan's Indus Basin: Challenges and Opportunities," *Water Policy* 23, no. 6 (2021): 1329–1343, and subsequent assessments.

through the January 2026 Arria-formula meeting and the April and June 2026 formal letters, and has framed India's conduct as water weaponisation prohibited by international law. The declaratory track has been blunt: the National Security Committee's warning of April 2025 that stopping Pakistan's waters would be an act of war, repeated by the Defence Minister in June 2026, and the army chief's widely reported remark in August 2025 that Pakistan would destroy any dam India built to block its rivers.[30] The domestic track has included announcements to accelerate storage projects, though familiar inter-provincial disputes, notably Sindh's resistance to new canals on the Indus, have already forced retreats.[31]

Pakistan has conspicuously not retaliated materially. It has closed its airspace only during the crisis period, taken no action against Indian interests elsewhere, and mounted no militarised response to the May 2025 flow interruptions beyond the four-day conflict itself. Some in New Delhi read this restraint as vindication: pressure works, and Pakistan can do nothing. That reading is dangerously shallow.

6.3 Why the Restraint Is Temporary

Pakistan's current quiescence has specific, temporary causes. The country is emerging from a prolonged economic emergency under an International Monetary Fund programme that leaves no fiscal room for confrontation. Its politics have remained deeply fractured since 2022, with the most popular political leader in prison and the government's legitimacy contested; a state absorbed in holding itself together expends its external energies. Its army is engaged on two other fronts, against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan(TTP) along the Afghan border, where relations with Kabul have deteriorated sharply, and against insurgency in Baluchistan. And the leadership has judged, so far correctly, that the legal and diplomatic track is winning: every arbitration award and every month of the Indian boycott improves Pakistan's position on paper.

None of these conditions is permanent, and two dynamics guarantee that the restraint will not last. The first is the maturation of India's infrastructure, traced in Chapter Three. Pakistan's military doctrine can tolerate symbolic interruptions at Baglihar; it cannot tolerate the physical completion of works that would hand India a hand on the dry season tap. Pakistani officials have already identified specific projects as red lines in their SC correspondence. As those

30 Statements catalogued in the chronology at Chapter Two; on the army chief's remark, see Amit Ranjan, "India-Pakistan Water Dispute: Navigating an Uncertain Future," ISAS Brief No. 1276, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, August 2025, and Ranjan and Donnellon-May, *Geopolitical Monitor*, 25 May 2026.

31 Joles, *National Public Radio*, 8 July 2025, on the paused canals project. See also, *The Express Tribune*, 19 June 2026.

projects near completion, pressure inside Pakistan to act against them, through sabotage, missile threats, or a pre-emptive strike, will grow, and the army chief's public threat against future dams shows the option is already on the table. The second dynamic is political. Water nationalism is the one cause that unites Pakistan's quarrelling provinces and parties; the May 2025 conflict showed how quickly external confrontation can consolidate the country. A weak government tempted to look strong, or a strong one seeking legitimacy, will find the water issue irresistible. India's planners should assume that the Pakistan of 2028 or 2030, facing completed Indian storage works, will be a more dangerous adversary on this issue than the distracted Pakistan of 2026, not a more resigned one.

6.4 The Provincial Fault Lines

Pakistan's vulnerability to upstream pressure is multiplied by a fracture inside the country that Indian planners understand perfectly well and that Pakistani politics has failed for decades to close. The Indus is not only shared between India and Pakistan; it is also shared among Pakistan's provinces under a domestic apportionment, the Water Accord of 1991, that Pakistan contests every dry season. Punjab, Pakistan's upper riparian, holds most of the irrigated land and the political weight. Sindh, downstream, watches the river arrive diminished and has learned to treat every new upstream work, Indian or Pakistani, as a threat to its share and to the dying Indus delta. Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa nurse their own grievances about allocations and representation.

The consequences for national strategy are direct. When the federal government moved in early 2025 to build new canals on the Indus for corporate farming, Sindh erupted, and the project was paused within weeks, with provincial politicians describing the canals as a deathbed for Sindh. The same veto politics has stalled large storage for a generation: the Kalabagh dam has been technically ready and politically impossible since the 1980s, because Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa distrust any structure that would give Punjab a larger hand on the tap. Pakistan therefore faces India's growing timing leverage, with roughly thirty days of national storage and no consensus on adding more, a weakness it has entirely inflicted on itself.[32]

There is a subtler danger. An Indian squeeze on the Chenab would not hit Pakistan evenly; it would bite first in Punjab's canal commands, and the reallocation fights that followed would set province against province, with the federal government in the middle. Hydro-coercion, in other words, is also a wedge aimed at Pakistan's internal seams, and some Indian commentary

32 Joles, *National Public Radio*, 8 July 2025, reporting Sindh's reaction and the pausing of the canals project.

has been candid about the wedge's attractions. The strategic reply available to Pakistan is equally plain, and Chapter Eleven makes it a formal recommendation: a national water compact, agreed across provinces and parties, that settles internal shares transparently, commits the storage programme, and thereby removes the wedge. States that cannot agree with themselves about water negotiate about it with adversaries from weakness. This, too, is a choice.

6.5 The Street and the Water

A further Pakistani variable belongs in the assessment: public opinion, which, on water, is not a backdrop but an actor. Water scarcity is a lived experience for most Pakistanis, from the tail-end farmer whose canal turn arrives short to the Karachi household buying from tankers, and decades of politics have taught the public to read scarcity through the Indian lens; every dry spell since 2008 has produced accusations against upstream projects, whether or not hydrology supported them. The abeyance has converted that suspicion into certainty and given it official sanction. The tenor of an intensely competitive media suggests that no position commands broader consensus in Pakistan than resistance on the rivers; parties that agree on nothing compete to own the issue, and the May 2025 conflict showed how quickly water and war fuse in public feeling. The consequence for crisis stability is direct. In the scenarios of Chapter Seven, Pakistani decision-makers are not choosing between escalation and calm; they are choosing between escalation and being replaced by someone who will escalate. Foreign observers who ask why Islamabad cannot simply absorb a season of shortfall have not sat in that seat. The observation cuts both ways, and fairness requires saying so: Indian leaders face publics taught for a decade that the rivers are a weapon owed to them. Two governments have educated two publics into positions from which retreat is punished. That shared pedagogy of intransigence, more than any dam or doctrine, is what the mediators of Chapter Ten will be working against.

6.6 The Storage Arithmetic: What Pakistan Must Build Regardless

Whatever happens diplomatically, one set of numbers defines Pakistan's homework, and stating it plainly serves the report's purpose of separating what India has done to Pakistan from what Pakistan has done to itself. Pakistan stores roughly thirty days of the Indus system's average flow, compared with 120 to 200 days in comparable irrigation economies; India, on its own eastern rivers, stores several times more per unit of flow. The two large reservoirs, Tarbela and Mangla, have lost a substantial share of capacity to silt since commissioning. The national target of adding about 10 million acre-feet of storage through projects such as Diamer-Bhasha and Mohmand has been announced repeatedly and funded intermittently; at current rates of

progress, the additions will barely offset sedimentation losses. Meanwhile, canal system losses are estimated at a third or more of diverted water, groundwater abstraction exceeds recharge across the Punjab breadbasket, and water pricing recovers only a small fraction of the system's operating costs, which ensures the waste continues.

The strategic point is uncomfortable and must be made. Every acre-foot of storage Pakistan fails to build, every canal it fails to line, and every rupee of pricing reform it defers transfers leverage to New Delhi as surely as any Indian dam. A Pakistan with 90 days of storage and an efficient system would be a country India's timing leverage could barely touch, whatever the abeyance says on paper. Conversely, the current configuration means Indian planners can achieve a coercive effect through interventions too small for the world to sanction. Water sovereignty, like every other kind, is ultimately built at home, and Chapter Eleven's recommendation of a national water compact is therefore not a development suggestion appended to a security report. It is the security report.

6.7 The Economics of Confrontation, on Both Sides of the Border

Because this report argues that the abeyance is an economic blunder for India as well as a strategic one, the economic ledger deserves systematic treatment, and it is presented here for both states together, since the costs are entangled.

For Pakistan, the direct costs are easiest to see and have been catalogued above: agricultural risk concentrated in the dry season, defensive over-allocation of scarce water, flood exposure without warning data, and the diversion of scarce fiscal capacity toward emergency storage. These must be added to the financing effect. Pakistan borrows its stability from the International Monetary Fund, Gulf depositors, and Chinese rollovers, and every escalation of the water dispute is read in those meetings as a higher probability that the borrower will fight a war. The premium is paid in harder terms and shorter tenors, and it is paid even if water flows stop.

For India, the costs are higher in absolute terms precisely because the Indian economy is larger and more globally entangled. The May 2025 conflict provided a controlled experiment: within days, Indian equity markets swung sharply, the national airline network operated around closed airspace, and the reported combat losses of Western-supplied aircraft moved procurement decisions in third countries. Multiply that week by a future in which every dry season carries war risk, and the price becomes structural rather than episodic. International investors price the tail risk of conflict into the cost of capital for long-gestation Indian projects; insurers price it into war-risk premiums for cargo through the Arabian Sea; and technology partners price it into decisions about where to locate irreplaceable capacity. India's entire growth model-

manufacturing relocation from China, energy transition finance, services exports- depends on being seen as the stable alternative in Asia. A rolling nuclear-shadowed water confrontation is the most efficient attack on that perception, and New Delhi is financing it itself.[33]

The counterfactual completes the ledger. Normalised India-Pakistan trade has been estimated by international institutions at potential volumes many times the pre-2019 figure of some two billion dollars a year; overland transit would connect Indian industry to Central Asia and Iran; and joint management of the basin's hydropower potential, which independent studies place among the largest undeveloped opportunities in Asia, would serve both countries' energy transitions. None of this is possible while water remains a weapon. The abeyance thus fails the simplest test: it makes both countries poorer, indefinitely, in exchange for making one government feel stronger, temporarily. Economists call this a negative-sum game. The next two chapters explain why negative-sum games between nuclear states are not merely wasteful but dangerous.[34]

The asymmetry is easier to see from the outside than from inside a confrontation. India grows faster and holds foreign-exchange reserves an order of magnitude larger, which is why a prolonged crisis threatens more of what India is trying to build, even as Pakistan's thinner cushion lowers the threshold at which it feels compelled to act.[35]

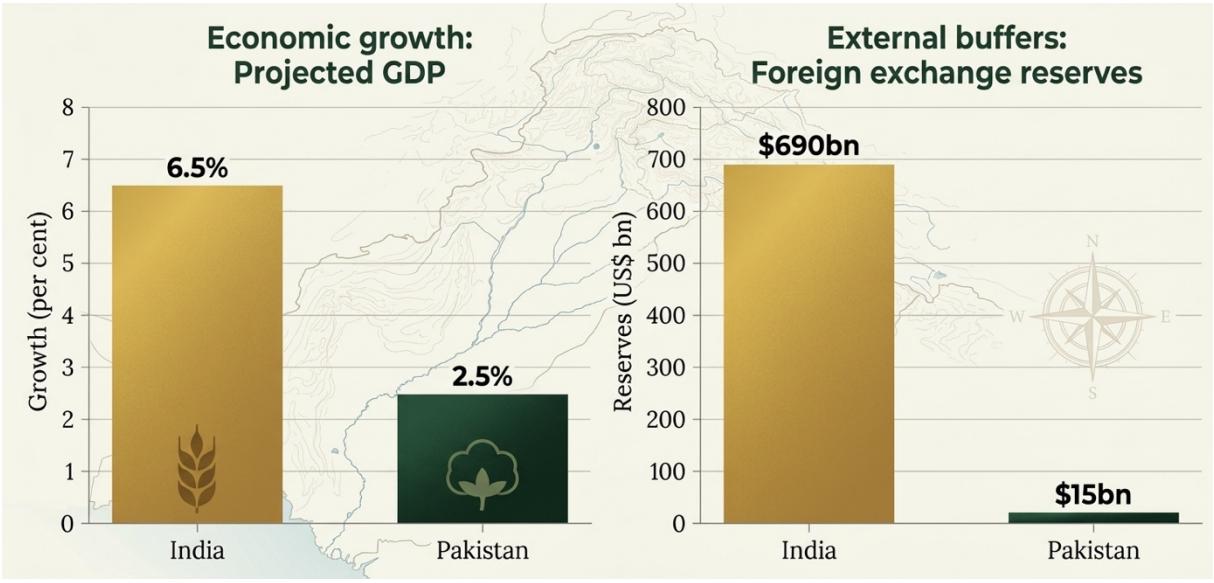
The question is what form that danger takes and whether it can be kept below the threshold of war. The next two chapters address that question.

33 Market volatility and the procurement consequences of the air battle are summarised in coverage of the May 2025 conflict; see Sachdeva, *The Diplomat*, 6 May 2026, and Reuters market reporting of 8 to 12 May 2025.

34 On the basin's hydropower potential, see the assessment cited in Ranjan, ISAS, 28 April 2026.

35 International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database (Washington, DC: IMF, April 2026); Reserve Bank of India, Weekly Statistical Supplement, 2026; State Bank of Pakistan, foreign exchange reserves data, 2026.

Figure 5. Asymmetric Exposure: Growth and External Buffers, India and Pakistan



Source: Author's elaboration based on IMF and central bank data, 2026 (indicative).

Chapter Seven: Escalation Pathways

7.1 What May 2025 Taught Both Sides

Escalation analysis must start from the most recent data point, and the data point is alarming. The four-day conflict of May 2025 was the most intense fighting between India and Pakistan since 1971. India struck nine sites inside Pakistan and Pakistani-administered Kashmir with missiles and drones; the two air forces fought a beyond-visual-range battle involving more than a hundred aircraft; Pakistan struck back at Indian military installations; and by the final night both sides were hitting each other's air bases, including facilities associated with strategic forces, before a ceasefire took hold on 10 May with intensive American engagement.[36]

Each side drew lessons, and the lessons point in opposite directions from stability. India concluded that it has established a new normal: terrorism will be answered with strikes on Pakistani territory, "nuclear blackmail" will not constrain the response, and escalation can be calibrated and controlled. Indian leaders spent the following year advertising exactly this doctrine, promising that the next attack would trigger a firm and decisive response. Pakistan concluded that it matched India blow for blow, gained diplomatically from American involvement in the ceasefire, and unified its home front; its army chief emerged a field marshal. Both establishments, in other words, believe they won a four-day war between nuclear powers. Analysts have identified the resulting danger precisely: de-escalation in South Asia now rests on the belief that escalation can be managed, and each successfully managed crisis deepens the belief while consuming the margin for error.[37] SIPRI's assessment of the conflict reached the same conclusion, noting that although both sides took deliberate steps to keep the fighting conventional, the engagement left a persistent risk of rapid, inadvertent escalation to nuclear use.[38]

Three specific features of May 2025 will shape the next crisis. First, speed: in 2019, the crisis produced a single air strike 12 days after the Pulwama attack, whereas the 2025 conflict opened with its largest air battle on the first night and demanded decisions within hours once fighting began; decision times in a crisis are compressing. Second, depth: strikes reached Punjab province and Indian bases far from Kashmir; the old confinement of fighting to the disputed

36 Swasti Sachdeva, "A Year After Operation Sindoor: Rising Risks and Deepening Instability," *The Diplomat*, 6 May 2026.

37 Sachdeva, *The Diplomat*, 6 May 2026: "the real danger is not escalation itself, but the increasing belief that escalation can be managed."

38 *SIPRI Yearbook 2026* (Stockholm: SIPRI, June 2026), assessment of the May 2025 conflict. See also Sachdeva, *The Diplomat*, 6 May 2026, on Indian statements after the ceasefire.

territory is gone. Third, mediation dependence: the ceasefire required Washington. A future crisis in which one side is distracted, disengaged, or distrustful of the US will lack the brake that stopped this one.

7.2 Inside the Four Days: What Almost Happened

The May 2025 conflict rewards closer inspection than headlines allowed, because several of its features were first, and firsts become templates.

It was the first drone war between nuclear-armed states. Waves of loitering munitions and reconnaissance drones crossed the border in both directions between 8 and 10 May, striking or probing air defences from Kashmir to Gujarat and from Karachi's approaches to Punjab. Drones matter for escalation because they lower the threshold of first use, a machine's loss demands less response than a pilot's death, while multiplying the volume of ambiguous incidents that air defences must classify at night. Both militaries have since expanded their drone and counter-drone programmes substantially; the next crisis will open with hundreds of such systems airborne, each a potential misread.

It featured the largest beyond-visual-range air engagement ever fought, with more than a hundred aircraft duelling at ranges beyond a hundred kilometres on the first night. At these ranges, air combat is decided by sensors, data links, and missile seekers, systems whose performance neither side fully knows in advance and whose results arrive as sudden, deniable losses. Later reconstructions still contest reported Indian aircraft losses that night, including Western-supplied fighters, but the reports alone unsettled planners in several capitals and coloured procurement debates from Jakarta to Paris. For escalation purposes, the lesson is grim: modern air war between these two states produces large, prestige-laden losses within hours, and losses of that kind demand answers on the same timeline.

Most seriously, the final night reached the edge of the strategic domain. Pakistani missiles struck Indian bases; Indian strikes hit Pakistani bases, including Nur Khan near Rawalpindi, an installation adjacent to the country's military command districts and associated in public commentary with strategic forces. Striking near an adversary's nuclear command infrastructure, whether by design or by target list momentum, is how conventional wars brush against nuclear ones: the defender must decide, in minutes, whether its deterrent is being hunted. Multiple accounts of the crisis diplomacy describe Washington's engagement intensifying sharply at exactly this point, with the Vice President and Secretary of State working the phones through the night of 9 to 10 May. The ceasefire announced hours later was held after initial violations. The record shows that the subcontinent stood one misidentified strike away from a nuclear

signalling spiral, fourteen days after a water treaty was suspended, and both capitals remember this not as a warning but, dangerously, as proof of manageability.[39]

7.3 Why a Water Crisis Is More Dangerous Than a Terrorism Crisis

It is tempting to file the water dispute alongside terrorism as one more irritant that produces occasional four-day storms. The structure of a water confrontation is, in fact, more dangerous for four reasons.

A water crisis is continuous, not episodic. A terrorist attack is a point in time; outrage peaks and decays, and diplomats work with the decay. Interference with a river renews itself with every day of shortfall. There is no decay curve to work with; pressure accumulates instead of dissipating.

A water crisis is seasonal and therefore schedulable. Both sides can see the rabi sowing calendar. If India ever uses timing leverage, it will use it in the dry months when it hurts; Pakistan therefore faces use-it-or-lose-it pressure to act before the dry season, and such windows are classic accelerants of pre-emption.

A water crisis engages survival directly. Chapter Six sets out the numbers; Pakistani doctrine, examined in the next chapter, explicitly reserves nuclear weapons for threats to the state's survival, and Pakistani officials from the NSC downward have already, formally and repeatedly, placed water strangulation in that category. No terrorism crisis begins with the target state having pre-declared the issue a casus belli. This one does.

A water crisis offers uniquely attractive targets. Dams are large, fixed, undefended against modern missiles, and symbolically perfect. Pakistan's army chief has publicly threatened to destroy future Indian dams with missiles. Strikes on water infrastructure also carry a special escalatory charge: a breached dam is a weapon of mass destruction by flood, and each side knows the other's dams are hostages.[40]

39 On the American diplomatic engagement of 9 and 10 May 2025, see Sachdeva, *The Diplomat*, 6 May 2026, and contemporaneous reporting by CNN and Reuters, 10 May 2025.

40 Threat reported in international coverage of the army chief's August 2025 remarks; see Amit Ranjan, ISAS Brief No. 1276, August 2025, and Ranjan and Donnellon-May, *Geopolitical Monitor*, 25 May 2026.

7.4 The Pathway, Rung by Rung

The report's escalation pathway is presented as six movements, illustrated in Figure 6. It is a risk map, not a forecast; at every rung there are exits, and the final section of this chapter examines them.

Figure 6. The Hydro-Coercion Escalation Ladder: A Risk Pathway, Not a Prediction



Source: Author's elaboration.

Rung One: The Permanent Crisis Floor. This is where the region stands today. The treaty machinery is dead, data exchange has ceased, arbitration awards accumulate unenforced, and both governments have pre-committed publicly: India to never restore the treaty, Pakistan to war if the water stops. The floor itself is stable only in appearance; it removes every routine channel through which the next misunderstanding would once have been clarified.

Rung Two: The Infrastructure Race Matures. Over the coming five years, India completes storage-capable and diversion works on the Chenab system; Pakistan responds with accelerated dam building, missile deployments oriented against water infrastructure, and explicit targeting declarations. Each completed Indian project ratchets up Pakistani threat perception; each

Pakistani declaration confirms Indian narratives of Pakistani aggression. The security dilemma operates in concrete and steel.

Rung Three: The Triggering Anomaly. In a dry winter, Chenab flows fall well below expectations during sowing season. The cause may be drought, sedimentation, Indian reservoir filling at a new project, or all three; without data exchange, Pakistan cannot distinguish them, and its planners, primed by years of Indian rhetoric, assume the worst. Alternatively, the trigger is another mass-casualty terrorist attack in India, after which New Delhi, trapped by its own doctrine, reaches for visible water action alongside or instead of strikes. Either way, the crisis arrives wearing Water's face.

Rung Four: First Use of Force Against Infrastructure. Pakistan executes a demonstration strike, most plausibly with conventional missiles or sabotage, against an Indian project it has named as a red line, calculating, exactly as India calculated in 2019 and 2025, that a calibrated strike restores deterrence and can be managed. India, whose government has staked its identity on never absorbing a blow, responds under its post-Sindoor doctrine with strikes on Pakistani military targets. The May 2025 template now runs again, but with three differences: the object in dispute is continuous rather than episodic, dams on both sides are now legitimate targets in each side’s declared logic, and the first days of fighting include, or threaten, releases and breaches that flood civilian populations.

Rung Five: The Limited War That Will Not Stay Limited. Air and missile exchanges extend over weeks rather than days because the underlying condition, the water, does not resolve. Attacks on dams and barrages produce civilian catastrophe imagery that inflames the public beyond their governments’ control. India’s conventional advantages press Pakistan toward horizontal escalation, along the LoC and the international border; mobilisation begins; and Pakistan’s military, facing the loss of major formations or territory, approaches the thresholds its doctrine has always advertised.

Rung Six: The Nuclear Threshold. Chapter Eight examines this rung in detail. Here it is enough to say that every serious wargame of an India-Pakistan conventional war reaches this rung faster than the players expect, and that a war that began over water reaches it faster still, because Pakistan’s nuclear doctrine was written precisely for threats that strike at the country’s survival by non-military means, of which water strangulation is the textbook case.

7.5 The Exits, and Why They Are Narrowing

At each rung there are exits. At rung three, transparency is an exit: flow data, jointly verified, can prove a shortfall natural. But India has switched off the data. At rung four, third-party restraint is an exit: Washington supplied it in May 2025. But American attention is scarce; the 2026 Iran war has consumed much of it, and Indian politics increasingly resents the very mediation Pakistani politics celebrates, making the next round harder. At rung five, agreed sanctuaries are an exit: states have sometimes tacitly spared each other's dams, cities, or nuclear-related sites. But the abeyance has destroyed the one agreed sanctuary South Asia possessed, the ring-fence around water itself, and each side's public targeting of the other's water works is dismantling the taboo that would be needed.[41]

The honest summary is this. None of the six rungs require any actor to behave irrationally. Each requires only that leaders repeat choices they have already made once, in an environment their own policies have made less forgiving. That is what it means to say the abeyance raises the probability of nuclear war. Not certainty; probability. Probabilities of catastrophe do not need to be high to be intolerable.

7.6 Three Vignettes

Abstract pathways persuade analysts; concrete stories persuade decision-makers. The following three vignettes are illustrations, not predictions. Each is assembled entirely from events that have already happened once, rearranged in time.

Vignette One:

The Dry Rabi, Winter 2028. A weak monsoon is followed by a cold, dry autumn. Chenab flows at Marala fall forty per cent below the ten-year mean in the sowing window. Indian engineers are conducting first fills at two newly completed Chenab projects, a routine operation the treaty would once have required them to notify and schedule; no notification exists any longer. Pakistani social media, primed by three years of official rhetoric, declares the strangulation begun. Wheat sowing is delayed across central Punjab; provincial politicians outbid each other in fury; the army chief repeats his pledge that dams built to block Pakistan's rivers will be destroyed. India's Home Minister, campaigning in a state election, repeats that the treaty will never be restored. A Pakistani drone of unclaimed origin crashes near the Ratle

41 On the asymmetric reception of United States involvement in the May 2025 ceasefire, see Sachdeva, *The Diplomat*, 6 May 2026; on the 2026 United States-Iran conflict and its regional effects, "A Year After Operation Sindoor, Pakistan Is in Trouble at Home, Basks in Glory Abroad," *The Diplomat*, 11 May 2026.

site. India places air defences on alert, and its leadership, bound by its post-Sindoor doctrine, warns that any attack on Indian soil will meet a decisive response. Nothing further happens that winter. Both militaries update their target folders. The next dry year begins one rung higher.

Vignette Two:

Pahalgam Again, Spring 2029. A mass-casualty attack strikes Indian tourists, this time in Himachal Pradesh, near the very diversion works the abeyance spawned. Attribution is contested and later proves partly wrong, but within 48 hours, faster than in 2025, India launches strikes on camps in Pakistan and, for the first time, announces the permanent diversion of a defined volume of Chenab water as a punitive measure, converting symbol into substance. Pakistan's response, unlike in 2025, includes a salvo of conventional missiles against the gates and penstocks of one named Indian project, executed at night to minimise casualties, presented to the world as the proportionate defence of an existential resource that Pakistani officials have promised for four years. Two nuclear states have now struck the other's territory over water. The May 2025 playbook resumes at rung four with the US distracted elsewhere, and the exits described above must all function on the first attempt.

Vignette Three:

The Flood Weapon Rumour, Monsoon 2030. An extreme monsoon, as climate assessments now expect, swells the Chenab to 2022 levels. An Indian project executes an emergency release, without notification, to save its own structure. The surge drowns villages in Pakistani Punjab; hundreds die. No one in Islamabad can prove intent, and no one can disprove it, because the data channel that would have carried the warning was severed five years earlier. Pakistan's government, facing streets convinced the flood was an attack, must choose between retaliation and collapse of its authority. This vignette is the cheapest to prevent; a data link would have prevented it, and for that reason it is the most damning. Institutions are not luxuries. They are the difference between a tragedy and a war.

Vignette Four:

The Quiet Success, 2027. For completeness, the pathway's avoidance deserves a story too, because it can be constructed from real events just as easily. The Neutral Expert delivers his award in late 2026. It is technical, dense, and gives each side points to claim. Washington's envoy, appointed that autumn, suggests privately that India's return to the Neutral Expert table would be read as strength, the victor rejoining to collect his winnings. The World Bank's data facility, launched months earlier, has been publishing flow bulletins that Pakistani television weather segments now cite nightly; the February 2027 dry spell passes without a single

accusation, because the numbers are public and they say drought. India resumes Article VI data transmission in the monsoon, framed as flood-safety cooperation after a near-disaster on the Sutlej; no minister retracts anything. Talks on treaty modernisation open in a Gulf capital under a name so boring the press ignores it. Nothing is solved. The abeyance is never formally lifted. But the machinery breathes, the ambiguity drains, and the season passes one rung lower. Peace between these two countries has never arrived as a treaty signing on a lawn. It arrives, when it arrives, as a quarter in which nothing happened, and the purpose of this report is to make such quarters ordinary again.

The vignettes share the mechanism this report traces from its first chapter: not malice at every step, but ambiguity manufactured by abeyance, meeting commitments manufactured by domestic politics, and timelines compressed by technology. Remove any one of the three, and the stories stall. The recommendations of Chapters Ten and Eleven are aimed, deliberately, at all three.

7.7 Indicators and Warnings

Escalation analysis earns its keep by telling watchers what to watch. The following indicators, drawn from the pathway above, offer a monitoring checklist for governments, risk analysts, and researchers. Treat movement on any three within a single season as a flashing light.

On the Indian side: commencement of first filling at any storage-capable Chenab project during the October to March low-flow season; award of contracts or land acquisition for the Chenab-Beas link or any trans-basin tunnel; ministerial language shifting from abeyance to termination or from terrorism conditions to no conditions; withdrawal from the Neutral Expert process after its award; hardening of air defences and permanent garrisons at project sites.

On the Pakistani side: explicit military exercises rehearsing strikes on riverine infrastructure; movement of conventional missile units to positions optimised for the Chenab works; formal designation of named Indian projects as red lines in NSC language rather than diplomatic correspondence; domestic legislation or resolutions committing the government to specified responses; suspension of participation in arbitration in favour of self-help language.

On the systemic side: a failed or absent great-power response to any new India-Pakistan incident, which would signal the mediation brake is unavailable; a winter of severe drought across the basin, which supplies rung three’s raw material; terrorist attacks in India timed to the sowing season; and, most quietly, the retirement or transfer of the small cadre of officials on both sides who staffed the Commission and remember how the machinery worked. Institutions

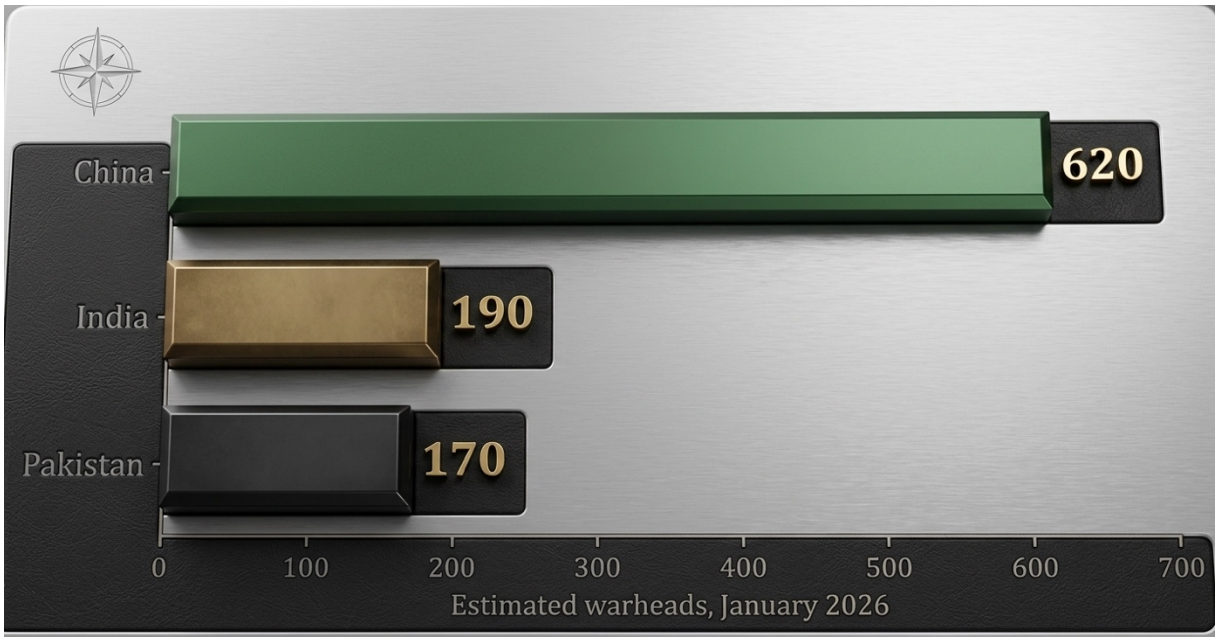
die twice, once on paper and once when the people who could revive them disperse. The second death is nearer than it looks.

Chapter Eight: The Nuclear Factor

8.1 Two Arsenals, Growing and Diversifying

The material facts come from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's 2026 assessment. As of January 2026, India held an estimated 190 nuclear warheads and Pakistan about 170, within a global inventory of some 12,187. The numbers are less important than the trajectories. India expanded its stockpile again in 2025 and is assessed to have begun deploying warheads aboard ballistic missile submarines, completing a triad of land, air, and sea delivery; its modernisation increasingly aims at targets throughout China, but its systems cover Pakistan first and always.[42] Pakistan's stockpile held steady in number while its delivery systems diversified, with a sea-based leg in development and continued fissile material production pointing to growth through the decade. Both states are pursuing missiles that carry multiple independently targetable warheads, a technology that rewards striking first and shortens leaders' decision time in a crisis, which SIPRI identifies as directly destabilising for the region.[43] Behind both stands China's arsenal of about 620 warheads, the fastest-growing in the world, which drives Indian requirements upward and, in turn, Pakistan's.[44]

Figure 7. Nuclear Stockpiles in Asia's Strategic Triangle, January 2026

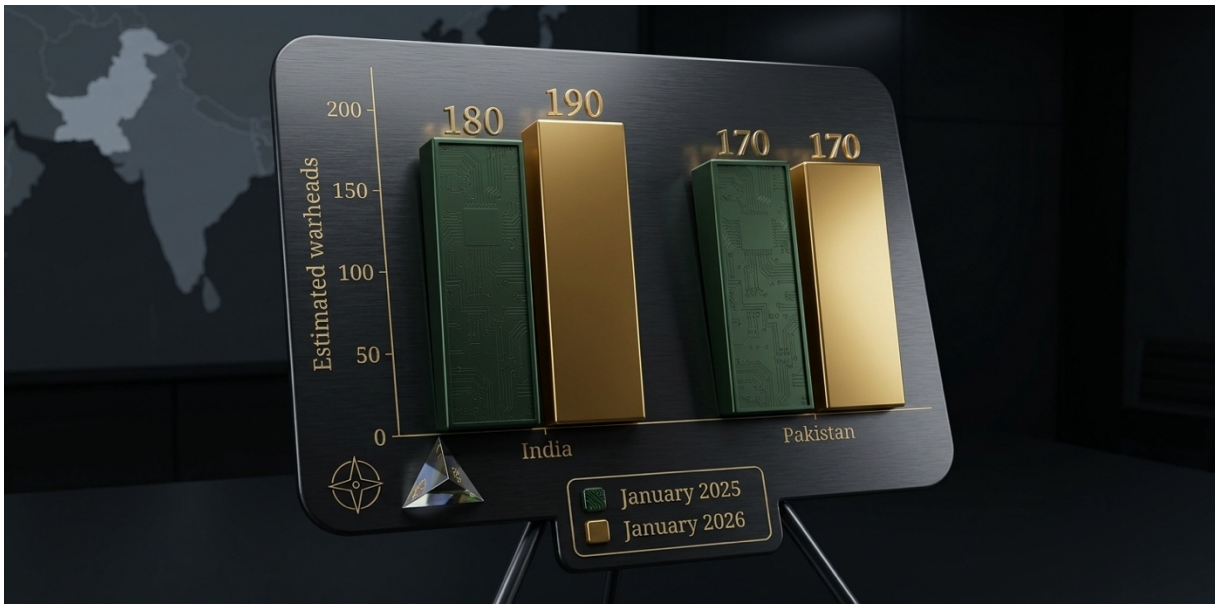


Source: SIPRI Yearbook 2026 (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2026).

42 *SIPRI Yearbook 2026*; see also the institute's June 2026 press release on heightened escalation risks.
43 *SIPRI Yearbook 2026* on MIRV development by India and Pakistan and its consequences for crisis stability.
44 *SIPRI Yearbook 2026* (Stockholm: SIPRI, June 2026), world nuclear forces chapter.

The trajectory of the two arsenals underlines the point. India's estimated stockpile grew over the year, while Pakistan's held steady, and India for the first time fielded a small number of deployed warheads, a shift with direct implications for crisis stability along the water pathway.[45]

Figure 8. Estimated Nuclear Stockpiles of India and Pakistan, January 2025 and January 2026



Source: SIPRI Yearbook 2026 (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2026).

8.2 Doctrines Built for Exactly This Collision

India's declared doctrine rests on no first use and massive retaliation: India will not use nuclear weapons first, but any nuclear attack on India or its forces will be answered at a level designed to inflict unacceptable damage. The declared doctrine has frayed at the edges for a decade, with senior figures hinting that no first use is not beyond review and with counterforce-flavoured capabilities, accurate missiles, MIRVs, and surveillance, entering the arsenal. After May 2025 Indian leaders added an operational layer: the promise that Pakistani "nuclear blackmail" will never again deter Indian conventional strikes. This promise serves a domestic political function. Its strategic function is to declare, in advance, that India will discount the signals Pakistan's doctrine is designed to send. Two states are now committed: one to sending last-resort signals, the other to ignoring them.

45 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2026* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2026), chapter on world nuclear forces.

Pakistan's doctrine is the mirror image, and it was built with scenarios like the water crisis in mind. Pakistan rejects no first use precisely because its conventional forces are the smaller; nuclear weapons exist to deter not only nuclear attack but conventional defeat and existential strangulation. Over the years, Pakistani officials have described the thresholds in terms of space, military, economic, and political destabilisation; the framework known as full spectrum deterrence extends coverage from strategic exchanges to battlefield weapons intended to stop invading formations on Pakistani soil. Relevance to water is not a matter of inference. The NSC has formally designated stopping the rivers an act of war, the doctrine's economic threshold is engaged by destroying an agricultural economy, and officials from the Defence Minister to the army chief have publicly connected the dots. When the army chief threatens to destroy Indian dams and reminds audiences that the Indus is not India's family property, he is not improvising; he is stating where water sits in the deterrence framework.[46]

8.3 Full Spectrum Deterrence and the Water Threshold

Because this report's central warning concerns the shift from water to warhead, Pakistan's threshold logic deserves more attention than doctrine summaries usually give it, as does how abeyance interacts with each threshold.

Pakistani officials have never deliberately published a nuclear doctrine document; ambiguity is the doctrine. But over two decades, authoritative figures associated with the Strategic Plans Division have described four broad thresholds that could trigger nuclear use: the spatial threshold, meaning the loss of large parts of national territory; the military threshold, meaning the destruction of a large part of the armed forces; the economic threshold, meaning economic strangulation of the state; and the political threshold, meaning destabilisation severe enough to threaten the state's integrity. The full-spectrum deterrence framework, adopted in the 2010s in response to Indian limited-war thinking, added short-range battlefield weapons so deterrence would operate at every level from skirmish to strategic exchange, denying India usable space for a conventional campaign below the nuclear ceiling.

Now place the water dispute against those four thresholds, and the reason for this report's alarm becomes precise. Sustained interference with the Indus engages the economic threshold directly: officials in Islamabad have used the word strangulation about water since 2008, when the president of the day warned that India was trading regional stability for short-term domestic

46 Statements reviewed in Amit Ranjan, ISAS Brief No. 1276, August 2025, in Ranjan and Donnellon-May, *Geopolitical Monitor*, 25 May 2026, and in chronology at Chapter Two.

goals over the Chenab. It engages the political threshold through the provincial mechanics of Chapter Six: a dry season squeeze that set Punjab against Sindh amid food inflation describes state destabilisation. In the war scenarios of Chapter Seven, it engages spatial and military thresholds through the ordinary route of conventional defeat. Water is thus unique among the two countries' quarrels: it is the only issue that can, by itself, walk through all four gates of Pakistani nuclear doctrine. Kashmir is about territory; terrorism is about politics; only water is about everything, which is presumably why the NSC reached, within a day of the abeyance, the phrase "act of war."[47]

Two further doctrinal observations complete the picture. The first concerns India's massive retaliation pledge. Declaratory massive retaliation against a battlefield weapon used on Pakistani soil has always strained belief, and the strain is the danger: if Islamabad doubts the pledge, battlefield use looks survivable; if New Delhi honours it, a single tactical detonation becomes general war within the hour. Neither doctrine bridges this gap, and a water war creates the ground-offensive scenarios in which it opens. The second concerns command under attack. Pakistan's systems, and increasingly India's, are postured for rapid response; MIRVs, sea-based weapons, and strikes near command infrastructure like those seen on 10 May 2025 push both arsenals toward earlier delegation and faster timelines. Doctrines written in seminar rooms assume hours of deliberation. The May war's final night suggests the real allowance is minutes, at night, on partial information, the very condition in which thresholds are crossed by accident rather than decision.

8.4 How the Water Pathway Crosses the Threshold

Put the arsenals, the doctrines, and Chapter Seven's pathway together, and the crossing points become visible.

The first crossing point is misread signalling under time pressure. In a war that has reached rung five, Pakistan's doctrine calls for demonstrative steps, alert levels, and system dispersal, perhaps a test, to signal an approach to the threshold. India's post-2025 doctrine calls for treating such signals as blackmail to be ignored, and its emerging counterforce capabilities create pressure to strike Pakistani systems before dispersal completes. MIRVs and short flight times mean the window for judging whether an adversary's launch preparations are a signal or

47 Warnings by Pakistan's president in 2008 over Baglihar-related Chenab reductions are recorded in contemporary reporting in Dawn, September to October 2008, and in the survey literature on the basin's hydropolitics.

attack is minutes. This is the classic geometry of inadvertent escalation, and both countries are building toward it deliberately.

The second crossing point is the battlefield weapon. If Indian armoured formations cross the international border in strength, Pakistani doctrine provides for short-range nuclear use on Pakistani territory against the invasion. Indian doctrine provides that any nuclear use anywhere triggers massive retaliation. There is no agreed rung between one battlefield detonation and general nuclear war; the two doctrines simply do not connect, and a water war that produces an Indian ground offensive walks straight into the gap.

The third crossing point is the dams themselves. A breached major dam kills on the scale of a nuclear weapon; the flood wave from a Tarbela or a Bhakra would be a catastrophe measured in hundreds of thousands. A side that suffers such a breach, whatever the cause, will face public demands for retaliation in kind, and the distinction between a conventional catastrophe and a nuclear one, the firebreak on which all escalation control depends, will blur at exactly the moment it is needed. It bears repeating that both sides have now rhetorically placed each other's water infrastructure on target lists; rhetoric like this writes the first draft of wartime orders.

8.5 The Missing Guardrails

It is common, when nuclear risks are raised, to answer that India and Pakistan have managed their rivalry for decades and possess mechanisms for doing so. The mechanisms exist; the honest question is whether they bear the load the water dispute now places on them, and the answer is no.

The inventory is quickly made. A hotline connects the two Directors General of Military Operations (DGMO), and it worked in May 2025 to carry the ceasefire; it is a channel for stopping fighting already underway, not for preventing it, and it has no competence over water. An agreement dating from 1988 obliges each side to exchange lists annually of nuclear installations it will not attack; the lists have been exchanged every January for over three decades, including in 2026, and they cover reactors, not dams. A 2005 agreement provides notice of ballistic missile flight tests. There is no agreement covering cruise missiles, none covering drones which conducted their first two-nation battle in 2025, none covering cyber operations against infrastructure, and, since April 2025, no functioning channel of any kind on water. In practice, the Permanent Indus Commission was South Asia's most successful confidence-building measure: a standing body of professionals who met through wars and could establish facts within days. Silencing it means the rivalry's most escalation-prone new issue is the one with no guardrail at all.

Worse, success has weakened the load-bearing informal guardrail: the belief that the other would ultimately stop. Every crisis that survived since 1999 has taught both establishments that the other blinks, that Washington arrives, and that the ladder has a top floor below catastrophe. This is the survivor's fallacy. The sample crises are small, the mediator's availability is variable, and the May 2025 precedent of striking air bases associated with strategic forces has already consumed the margin that earlier crises preserved. Guardrails built for episodic terrorism crises are being asked to contain a continuous, seasonal, survival-grade dispute between arsenals acquiring first-strike characteristics. Engineers who load a structure beyond its design case do not get to be surprised by the collapse.

The gap defines the agenda. A water-specific incident channel restored flow data, an extension of the non-attack list logic from reactors to major dams and barrages, and pre-agreed procedures for emergency releases would together cost less than one fighter aircraft, and they are the specific content behind Chapter Ten's recommendations. Their absence is a policy choice, currently New Delhi's, and it should be named as such.

8.6 Slowing the Arsenal Race Itself

Finally, the nuclear dimension has its own remedies that the water agenda should not crowd out. Nothing in South Asia currently restrains the technologies most corrosive to crisis stability: MIRVs, sea-based systems with opaque command arrangements, dual-capable missiles that force a worst-case reading of every launch, and the drone and cyber layers that blur the threshold of attack. The bilateral agreements that exist- the non-attack list on nuclear installations, missile test notification, and the hotlines- were designed for the arsenal of the 2000s. A modest agenda is available and has been sketched by strategic communities on both sides for years: extension of test notifications to cruise missiles; a declared mutual moratorium on MIRV deployment while numbers are still low; incident-at-sea-style protocols as both navies go nuclear; and, most relevantly to this report, the extension of the non-attack list from reactors to major dams and barrages, which would take one January exchange of letters to begin. None of this requires solving Kashmir, terrorism, or the treaty. Each measure narrows the corridor through which this report's water pathway reaches the arsenals. Great-power sponsors pressing the mediation agenda of Chapter Ten should carry this list in the same folder, because the two agendas protect each other: water restraint keeps crises from starting, and strategic restraint keeps the crises that do start from ending in catastrophe.

8.7 What the Region and the World Would Lose

A short section must record, without drama, what nuclear use in South Asia means, because policy debates in distant capitals sometimes proceed as if deterrence failure were a regional problem. Even a so-called limited exchange of some dozen weapons against cities would kill tens of millions of people directly. Peer-reviewed studies of an India-Pakistan nuclear war involving a fraction of current arsenals project soot injections into the stratosphere sufficient to cool the planet, shorten growing seasons, and place one to two billion people at risk of famine, most of them far from South Asia. The Indus dispute is, among other things, a dispute about food security for 240 million people. A war arising from it would create food insecurity for a quarter of humanity. That asymmetry between stake and risk is the moral core of this report, and it is why the following chapter treats international mediation not as interference in a bilateral matter but as self-defence by the international community.[48]

48 The climatic and famine effects of a regional nuclear war are assessed in the peer-reviewed literature on nuclear winter scenarios, notably Owen B. Toon et al., "Rapidly Expanding Nuclear Arsenals in Pakistan and India Portend Regional and Global Catastrophe," *Science Advances* 5, no. 10 (2019), and Lili Xia et al., "Global Food Insecurity and Famine from Reduced Crop, Marine Fishery and Livestock Production due to Climate Disruption from Nuclear War Soot Injection," *Nature Food* 3 (2022): 586–596.

Chapter Nine: Consequences for the Region and Beyond

9.1 The Precedent Problem: Every River Has Upstream

Treaties are load-bearing in ways that become visible only when one collapses. For six decades, the IWT was cited in classrooms and chancelleries alike as proof that even enemies can insulate water from war. Its suspension teaches the opposite lesson, and the students are attentive.

The first student is China. China sits upstream of India on the Brahmaputra and upstream of much of mainland Southeast Asia on the Mekong; it has approved at the Brahmaputra's great bend the largest hydropower scheme on earth, and it is party to no water treaty with India at all, only modest data-sharing memoranda that it has suspended before during political quarrels. Every argument India now makes on the Indus- that an upstream state may condition water cooperation on the downstream state's behaviour, that treaty organs can be boycotted when inconvenient, that security concerns override riparian obligations- is an argument China can quote back to India word for word. Indian strategists know this; some argue China needed no precedent. That is too comfortable. Precedents do not create capabilities, but they lower the diplomatic price of using them, and India has just marked that price down for the one neighbour that can hurt it most. India is the upper riparian to Pakistan and the lower riparian to China, and it has chosen to legislate for the role in which it is weaker.

The second set of students is global. From the Nile, where Ethiopia's dam has brought Egypt to the edge of confrontation, to the Tigris-Euphrates, the Amu Darya, and Central Asia's shrinking rivers, dozens of basins are watching whether weaponising water carries costs. The UN Charter's framework and the customary rule of equitable and reasonable use survive only through practice. Pakistan has argued before the SC that international law prohibits using water as a weapon against downstream populations and that enforcing the treaty matters for the integrity of global water governance. On this point, whatever one thinks of Pakistan's broader record, Pakistan is simply right. Some three billion people live in basins shared between states. A world in which the Indus precedent stands is a world in which each of them has become a potential hostage.[49]

49 "Dar Writes to UNSC Seeking Action over India's Attempts to Alter River Flows," *The Express Tribune*, 19 June 2026.

9.2 Regional Consequences Short of War

Even if the escalation pathway of Chapter Seven is never travelled, the abeyance is already reshaping the region for the worse.

It has re-hyphenated India and Pakistan just as New Delhi hoped to escape the pairing. India's global brand rests on being the democratic counterweight to China and the world's fastest-growing large economy. A rolling water confrontation with a nuclear neighbour, punctuated by arbitration defeats and SC letters, returns India to the crisis file in every foreign ministry. Investors read the same file: war risk repriced Indian assets within days in May 2025, and the reported downing of Western-supplied aircraft in the air battle had procurement consequences from Jakarta to Paris. Sustained eight per cent growth, the foundation of every Indian ambition, requires strategic quiet. The abeyance purchases strategic noise permanently. India cannot reach durable economic peace and sustainable growth while keeping its principal disputes with Pakistan not merely unresolved but deliberately inflamed; that trade-off is arithmetic, not opinion.[50]

It has strengthened exactly the forces in Pakistan that India claims to oppose. The May 2025 conflict and the water confrontation have restored the Pakistani army to a centrality it had lost, produced a field marshal, and given every civilian faction reason to defer to the men who face India. A Pakistan governed from the garrison is not a Pakistan that will dismantle militant networks; it is a Pakistan in which those networks' patrons hold more cards. Indian policy is manufacturing its own justification.

It has degraded regional cooperation generally. South Asia was already the world's least integrated region; the abeyance has frozen what little remained, from trade to cricket, and has pushed Pakistan further toward China, deepening the two-front alignment India most fears. Meanwhile, Afghanistan, upstream of Pakistan on the Kabul River, has begun invoking India's example in its own water quarrels with Islamabad, an early confirmation that the precedent travels.

9.3 The Climate Multiplier

Everything above unfolds against a hydrological transformation that spares no one. The basin has lost roughly a quarter of its perennial snow and ice in two decades; flows will rise with accelerated melt and then decline as the glaciers thin, while the monsoon grows more violent

50 Market and procurement reactions summarised in coverage of the May 2025 conflict; see Sachdeva, *The Diplomat*, 6 May 2026.

and less predictable. Climate change means the treaty's fixed allocations were due for hard conversations regardless of politics; it also means natural anomalies, exactly the kind that trigger three of the escalation pathways, will grow more frequent. Two nuclear states, no data exchange, a drying basin, and an annual dry season: the structural forecast is for recurring crises even without malice. With malice, the forecast is worse. The tragedy of the abeyance is that both countries need more water cooperation than the 1960 treaty provided, and India has chosen to deliver less than none.[51]

9.4 The Water Wars Debate, Revisited

A generation of scholars held that water wars are a myth. Based on large historical datasets, they found that states sharing rivers cooperate far more often than they fight, that no modern war has been fought purely over water, and that water's importance drives adversaries to agreement; the Indus treaty itself served as the star exhibit. The optimists' mechanism was straightforward: water disputes are continuous, technical, and negotiable, and the downstream state's vulnerability gives the upstream state something to trade rather than something to seize.

The abeyance obliges honest reassessment, not because the scholarship was wrong about the past, but because its supporting conditions are being dismantled in the present, and knowingly so. The historical record of restraint was built by states that kept water in the hands of engineers, exchanged data as a matter of course, and embedded their basins in treaties with functioning referees. The Indus case now runs the experiment in reverse: remove the referee, silence the engineers, stop the data, attach the river to the two states' deepest identity conflict, and add nuclear weapons, compressed decision timelines, and leaders rewarded domestically for escalation. No 20th century dataset covers those conditions. The optimists also drew their cases overwhelmingly from basins where the disputing states were not existential rivals; where they were, on the Jordan, around the Nile, the record shows raids, sabotage, and mobilisations that stopped short of war partly through luck and outside pressure. The literature's correct reading is therefore conditional and not comforting, because water rarely causes wars where institutions manage it, and the Indus is rapidly losing its institutions. This report's escalation analysis is not a rejection of the scholarship. It is the scholarship's own warning label, applied to the first nuclear-armed basin to tear the label off.

51 Amit Ranjan, "The Indus Waters Treaty: A Year After the Pahalgam Terror Attack," ISAS Brief, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, 28 April 2026, citing Khan et al.

9.5 The Neighbourhood Watches

The precedent's first ripples are already visible inside South Asia itself, and three cases deserve brief record because each will be cited in future disputes.

Afghanistan sits upstream of Pakistan on the Kabul River system, which contributes a meaningful share of flows to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and no treaty governs those waters. Since 2025, amid its own sharply deteriorating relations with Islamabad, the Taliban government has accelerated dam projects on the Kunar and Kabul rivers, and its officials have noted that Pakistan's demand for downstream protections on the Kabul mirrors the Indian arguments Pakistan denounces on the Indus, and vice versa. Pakistan thus plays both riparian roles simultaneously, which should make Islamabad the region's most principled advocate of downstream norms and make India's demolition of those norms doubly corrosive.

Bangladesh depends on India for the Ganges, governed by a treaty that expires in 2026 and must be renewed, and for the Teesta, where no agreement has ever been concluded. Dhaka's negotiators now bargain with a neighbour that has shown, on the Indus, that water treaties bind only when convenient. Every clause of the Ganges renewal will be read in that light, and Bangladeshi politics, newly volatile since 2024, offers fertile ground for water nationalism of its own.

Nepal and Bhutan, whose economies rest on hydropower exported to India, draw a quieter lesson about dependence on a partner that has normalised linking water to unrelated disputes. None of these ripples is a crisis today. Together, they mark the transformation of South Asia's waters from a domain of technical management into a domain of leverage, the abeyance's true regional legacy.

9.6 The Global Stake: Food, Finance, and the Climate Order

The consequences beyond the region are usually discussed, as in Chapter Eight, through the smoke of nuclear scenarios. They should also be counted in the world of intact cities, because even a non-nuclear deterioration of the Indus dispute reaches far beyond South Asia. Pakistan is among the world's principal rice exporters, and Indian and Pakistani rice together anchor supply for import-dependent countries across the Middle East and Africa; a dry-season crisis that cut Pakistani irrigation would arrive in Cairo and Nairobi as a price shock within months, in a global food system still scarred by recent wars. The two countries' combined population of over one and a half billion makes any subcontinental instability a first-order variable for energy markets, shipping insurance through the Arabian Sea, and the remittance economies of the Gulf,

which employ millions of workers from both states. And the climate order has a specific stake: the Indus basin is the largest single test of whether transboundary water governance can adapt to glacier loss, and the international climate regime's promises about adaptation finance and cooperation will be measured against what happens there. A world that watches the model water treaty die of politics and does nothing has told every drying basin what its agreements are worth. The stake, in short, is not only South Asian lives, though they would be sufficient; it is the credibility of the entire architecture by which an increasingly thirsty world intends to share its rivers without fighting.

9.7 How the Great Powers Read the Dispute

Because Chapter Ten will assign the great powers tasks, this chapter should close by recording how each currently reads the file, since mediators must work with the readings that exist rather than the ones they would prefer.

Washington reads the dispute through the China lens first, then the non-proliferation lens. India is the indispensable counterweight in the Indo-Pacific, which produces a standing reluctance to spend leverage on New Delhi's regional conduct; at the same time, the May 2025 experience, in which American officials found themselves talking two nuclear states down in real time, left a genuine institutional scar and a quiet recognition that the subcontinent can wreck every other American priority in a week. The result is a policy of episodic intensity: neglect punctuated by rescue. This report's recommendation, in essence, is to smooth that curve.

Beijing reads the dispute with satisfaction and caution in equal measure. Satisfaction, because India's entanglement with Pakistan discounts India's weight everywhere else, and because the Indian precedent on treaty abeyance is a gift to the upstream power on the Brahmaputra. Caution, because Chinese capital and citizens sit along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) within range of any war, and because a nuclear exchange anywhere in Asia is a catastrophe for the Chinese economy. China will not mediate, but it can restrain Islamabad and avoid endorsing New Delhi's precedent, both of which are worth pursuing.

Moscow sees the dispute as an opportunity to stay relevant to both sides, selling arms to India while courting Pakistan, and as a useful demonstration that Western-designed legal orders are hollow. Its mediation credentials, dating to Tashkent in 1966, are historical rather than current, but its silence at the Security Council is purchasable, and its arms relationships give it channels others lack.

The Gulf capitals read the dispute as a threat to two of their own pillars: the millions of Indian and Pakistani workers whose remittances stabilise both home countries, and the food and investment corridors they are building across South Asia. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have mediated quietly before, using financial leverage in Islamabad and growing economic weight in New Delhi, and, in this report's judgement, are the most underused actors in the entire file.

Europe and the United Kingdom read the dispute when they read it at all, as a legal and humanitarian question, which is precisely why their contribution matters: someone must keep saying, in multilateral rooms, that treaties are not weather, and the European legal tradition is the natural voice for it. The reading each capital brings is partial. Assembled, as Chapter Ten proposes, they cover the whole board.

Chapter Ten: International Mediation and the Guarantors

10.1 Why Mediation Is Legitimate Here

India's consistent position is that the treaty is a bilateral matter and outside involvement is unwelcome. The position fails on the treaty's own terms. The IWT exists because of international mediation; the World Bank proposed its architecture, financed its work through an international fund, signed the instrument for specified purposes, and continues to have procedural duties in appointing Neutral Experts and arbitrators. The dispute machinery sits at The Hague. Pakistan has invoked the SC under Article 33 of the Charter, which obliges parties to seek peaceful settlement of disputes likely to endanger peace, and few disputes on earth fit that description better than a water quarrel between states that fought an air war 14 months ago. And the May 2025 ceasefire itself was an internationally brokered arrangement, thanks to the mediating power. The international community is not intruding into this dispute. It is already inside it, by invitation of the treaty's own text and the parties' own history. The only question is whether its involvement will be organised or improvised.[52]

10.2 What Each Actor Can Do

The World Bank should resist the temptation of its own modesty. Facilitator is a role, not an excuse. Concretely, the Bank should keep the Neutral Expert and Court of Arbitration processes fully resourced and moving so that the machinery is warm when politics permits reentry; it should establish, even unilaterally, an independent basin data facility, drawing on satellite hydrology, that publishes flow data both parties can see, replacing the bilateral exchange India has cut and stripping rung three of the escalation ladder of its ambiguity; and it should quietly prepare a modernisation package, finance for storage and efficiency on both sides tied to restored treaty participation, so that returning to the treaty carries visible rewards.

The US remains the only actor both militaries answer the phone to at 2 a.m., as May 2025 proved. Washington should turn that episodic crisis role into standing policy: a designated senior envoy for South Asian strategic stability; explicit private messaging to New Delhi that water coercion carries costs in the technology and defence relationship India values; and matching messaging to Islamabad that threats of war and dam-busting bravado forfeit sympathy. The US should also resist the temptation to treat India's importance against China

52 On the United States role in the May 2025 ceasefire and its contested characterisation, see Sachdeva, *The Diplomat*, 6 May 2026.

as a licence for anything India does elsewhere; a South Asian war would be the greatest gift Beijing could receive.

The UK and Europe hold convening power and legal weight rather than hard leverage and should use both. The UK, with deep ties in both capitals and historical responsibility for the basin's partition, may host discreet Track 1.5 dialogues on treaty modernisation, which official India currently denies but functionally needs. European states should state plainly in multilateral forums that unilateral abeyance of water treaties is unlawful, a point on which European jurists are near-unanimous, so the legal cost of the precedent is clear.

China and the Gulf states are the unconventional mediators. China will not referee, but it can restrain: Beijing has no interest in a subcontinental war that engulfs its Belt and Road stake in Pakistan, and a Chinese word in Islamabad against pre-emptive action, paired with Chinese silence rather than endorsement of India's precedent, is attainable and valuable. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar financed Pakistan's stabilisation and wield real influence in both capitals; they have quietly mediated South Asian crises before and may do so now.

The UN cannot solve the dispute, but the Secretary-General can appoint a special representative for transboundary waters, and the Security Council's presidency can keep the matter on the agenda through the Arria format Pakistan has already used. Records built now shape behaviour later.

10.3 A Staged Path Back

Mediation needs a destination. The report proposes three stages, each designed to be face-saving.

Stage one, humanitarian and technical, within a year. Restoration of hydrological data-sharing, framed not as treaty restoration but as flood-safety cooperation, which India can present as a humanitarian gesture from strength. Resumed attendance at Neutral Expert proceedings, which India itself initiated. Quiet mutual assurance, conveyed through the United States, that water infrastructure is off target lists. Neither government needs to retract a single public statement.

Stage two, parallel processes, one to three years. Two tables, formally unconnected. At first, a counterterrorism dialogue with third-party verification support gives India a channel in which its Pahalgam grievances are addressed and Pakistan a channel in which to demonstrate the credible action India demands. Second, technical talks on treaty modernisation, climate provisions, updated engineering standards, and groundwater, conducted under World Bank

auspices as contemplated by Article XII (3). India obtains the renegotiation it has sought since 2023; Pakistan obtains the treaty's revival; neither concedes the linkage the other rejects.

Stage three, a modernised treaty, three to seven years. A protocol updating the 1960 text: climate-adaptive flow provisions, joint basin monitoring, modern dispute timelines, and, if both sides will have it, an incentive architecture of shared hydropower revenue that gives each state a stake in the other's projects. The 1960 treaty separated the rivers because the two states could not work together; a 2030s protocol should aim, modestly, to make working together pay.

10.4 What History Says Mediation Can Do

Scepticism about mediating between India and Pakistan is fashionable and half-right; therefore, the record must be consulted rather than assumed. It contains four lessons.

First, the treaty itself is the strongest evidence in the mediation archive. Between 1951 and 1960, the World Bank did not merely host talks; it reframed the problem, from sharing every river, which had failed for four years, to dividing the system, and it assembled the international finance that made division affordable. Mediation succeeded not by splitting differences but by changing the question. The staged path proposed above applies the same method: it changes the question from who wins the linkage battle, terrorism versus treaty, to how both processes can run without touching.

Second, great-power crisis intervention in South Asia has a near-perfect record when attempted. The Soviet Union brokered Tashkent in 1966; American engagement was decisive at Kargil in 1999, when President Clinton faced down Pakistan's leadership, in the 2001-02 mobilisation crisis, after Mumbai in 2008, at Balakot in 2019, and again in May 2025. The pattern is consistent: both establishments, whatever their public rhetoric, use external intervention as the ladder they climb down. The corollary is uncomfortable but must be stated: the mediator has always arrived after the shooting started. This report urges intervention at rung two rather than rung five.

Third, quiet mediation outlives loud mediation. The backchannel on Kashmir conducted between 2004 and 2007 came closer to a settlement framework than any public process before or since, and the Gulf-brokered contacts that produced the 2021 ceasefire on the Line of Control were denied by both sides while they worked. India's public allergy to third parties is real, but it governs the theatre, not the substance; the mediator celebrated the May 2025 ceasefire, New Delhi denied it, and both armies observed it regardless. Mediators should therefore accept in advance that one participant will publicly disown success and proceed anyway.

Fourth, technical cooperation survives political collapse if institutionalised. The Permanent Indus Commission met through two wars because its meetings were obligations, not gestures. The design lesson for stage one is to embed the restored data flow in a mechanism with its own calendar and its own professionals, insulated from the front pages by boredom. Nothing protects cooperation in South Asia as reliably as being too dull to politicise.

The window for stage one is now, while the abeyance is still policy rather than identity, while India's storage works are years from completion, and while Pakistan's response remains legal rather than kinetic. Every year of delay hardens all three conditions.

10.5 Answering the Objections

Every element of this agenda will meet objections, and the strongest deserve answers on the page.

The first objection is Indian: mediation rewards terrorism, because Pakistan will conclude that Pahalgam produced international pressure on India. The answer is in the design. The staged path never asks India to restore the treaty in response to the attack; it asks India to resume data and technical participation as humanitarian and self-interested acts, while a separate, serious counterterrorism track addresses the grievance on its own terms. What rewards the authors of Pahalgam is the present course, in which one attack purchased the destruction of South Asia's most valuable institution and a permanent crisis that armies on both sides are now organised around.

The second objection is Pakistani: Coming to the negotiating table would implicitly accept or legitimise the "abeyance", and it would buy time for India's construction schedule. Pakistan's alternative to engagement is not the status quo ante but the maturation of Indian works without any restraining framework at all. The legal record is preserved either way; stage one costs Pakistan nothing it values and buys back the data on which its floods and harvests depend.

The third objection is general: nothing can be done with the present Indian government, so wait it out. The answer is arithmetic. On current schedules the storage and diversion work across their thresholds of significance before Indian politics is likely to change, and Chapter Seven's pathway does not pause for elections. Statuesque is a policy; its content is rung two.

The fourth objection is the realist's: great powers no longer invest in other people's treaties. May 2025 is the refutation. When the price of inattention became a possible nuclear exchange, the issue was attended to within seventy-two hours. The argument in this report is merely that the same attention given earlier costs less and buys more. Fire brigades are cheaper than fires; that is the whole of the case.

10.6 Designing the Data Facility

Because the independent flow data facility is this report's first and most practical recommendation, its design deserves a paragraph of specification. The facility should publish, for defined stations on the six rivers, daily estimates of discharge derived from satellite altimetry, optical and radar imagery, and snow and glacier mass models, calibrated against the long historical record both countries hold. The technology is mature; research consortia already estimate river discharge from space with useful accuracy, and the World Bank has the

convening power to assemble the instruments, archives, and modest budget involved. Three design rules matter. Publication must be automatic and public, so that neither government can be accused of feeding the system or suppressing it; a bulletin both farmers and generals can read removes the monopoly of interpretation that fuels rung three. Governance must be plainly international, housed with the Bank or a consortium of neutral scientific agencies, with both countries invited to second technicians but neither holding a veto. And the facility must be framed as permanent global infrastructure for a climate-stressed basin, not as a crisis measure, so that joining costs no one face. If India restores Article VI data, the facility becomes verification; if India does not, it becomes substitution. Either way, the ambiguity that powers the escalation pathway is drained at its source, for the annual price of a few kilometers of motorway.

Chapter Eleven: Findings and Recommendations

11.1 Findings

- India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty is an act of hydro-coercion whose near-term hydrological effect is modest, but whose institutional effect is severe: it has destroyed the data exchange, commission, and dispute machinery that kept water out of three wars.
- The abeyance is unlawful under the treaty's own terms, as the Court of Arbitration has held, and India's boycott of the treaty's organs is costing it the legal and reputational high ground while Pakistan builds its documentary case at the UN.
- The policy is a product of the Modi government's majoritarian politics, in which confrontation with Pakistan serves domestic functions, and it has generated a commitment trap: both governments have made public promises, never to restore the treaty and to go to war if the water stops, that will constrain them in the next crisis.
- Pakistan's restraint is real but temporary, resting on economic distress, political fragmentation, and a winning legal strategy; it will erode as India's storage and diversion works mature, on a horizon of roughly five to ten years.
- The May 2025 conflict has normalised deep strikes between the two states and, unfortunately, bred a shared, dangerous confidence that escalation can be managed; SIPRI's 2026 assessment records growing arsenals, MIRV programmes, and shorter decision times on both sides.
- A water crisis is structurally more escalatory than a terrorism crisis because it is continuous, seasonal, survival-engaging, and rich in high-value fixed targets; a plausible six-rung pathway connects today's abeyance to the nuclear threshold without requiring any actor to behave irrationally.
- The consequences of this precedent extend beyond South Asia, inviting reciprocal logic from China on the Brahmaputra and weakening downstream protections in every shared basin on earth; deterrence failure would extend to global food security.
- International mediation is legitimate, built into the treaty's architecture, and currently the only mechanism that can arrest the dynamic, because neither government can climb down unassisted.

11.2 Recommendations

To the Government of India. Restore hydrological data-sharing immediately as a humanitarian measure, without prejudice to the abeyance. Return to the Neutral Expert proceedings India itself initiated. Pursue treaty modernisation through Article XII (3) rather than coercion, where India's substantive case is strong. Cease ministerial statements foreclosing restoration; strategic flexibility is not weakness. Recognise that the precedent being set on the Indus will be referred to on the Brahmaputra.

To the Government of Pakistan. Maintain the legal-diplomatic track, which is succeeding, and avoid the kinetic threats that squander it; dam-busting rhetoric strengthens India's narrative and weakens Pakistan's counsel. Treat the crisis as the final argument for domestic water reform: storage, canal efficiency, pricing, and resolution of the inter-provincial disputes that have paralysed projects for decades. Insulate water diplomacy from domestic political competition; a national water compact across parties and provinces would strengthen every Pakistani negotiator.

To the World Bank. Keep the treaty's machinery running and funded. Establish an open-access, satellite-based Indus flow data facility. Prepare a modernisation finance package as the visible reward for treaty reentry.

To the US. Appoint a standing senior envoy for South Asian strategic stability. Communicate privately that sustained water coercion, and any strike on water infrastructure, carry relationship costs. Sponsor the quiet mutual assurance on dam targeting described in Chapter Ten.

To the UK and partners. Host Track 1.5 dialogue on treaty modernisation. State clearly in multilateral settings that unilateral abeyance of water treaties has no legal basis. Fund the research and verification capacity, flow monitoring, and climate modelling that both parties will need at any future table.

To the Gulf states and China. Use financial and strategic influence in both capitals to hold both governments below rung four of the escalation pathways: no strikes on water infrastructure, no pre-emption, and no irreversible diversions while diplomacy finds its path to normalcy.

11.3 Sequencing the Recommendations

Recommendations without sequence are wishes. The table below arranges the report's proposals by horizon and by the actor whose move unlocks each step, so progress can be monitored and failure attributed.

Table 5. A Sequenced Programme of De-escalation Measures

Horizon	Step	Lead actor	Signal of success
0 to 6 months	Independent satellite-based Indus flow data facility, openly published	World Bank	First public flow bulletin issued
0 to 6 months	Private assurances against targeting water infrastructure	United States with both governments	Conveyed and acknowledged through military channels
0 to 12 months	Restoration of hydrological data-sharing framed as flood safety	India	Resumption of Article VI transmissions
0 to 12 months	End of dam-targeting rhetoric	Pakistan	Six months without such statements at senior level
6 to 18 months	India returns to Neutral Expert proceedings	India	Attendance at next session
12 to 36 months	Parallel counterterrorism and treaty-modernisation tracks open	United States, United Kingdom, Gulf facilitators	Both tables convened, however quietly
12 to 36 months	Pakistan national water compact across provinces	Pakistan	Accord ratified by all provincial assemblies
3 to 7 years	Modernisation protocol under Article XII(3)	Both parties with World Bank	Ratified protocol: Commission restored

Source: Author's elaboration.

Two features of the sequence deserve emphasis. Every step in the first year is deniable, reversible, and consistent with each government's public position, which is what makes the first year possible. The first two steps require neither Delhi nor Islamabad to move; they belong to the World Bank and Washington. In other words, the international community holds the opening moves. If the sequence never begins, the record will show whose turn it was.

Chapter Twelve: Conclusion

Great errors in statecraft rarely look like errors at the time. They look like strength. In April 2025, the suspension of the IWT looked, from New Delhi, like strength: a proud civilisation refusing to water the fields of an enemy that had buried 26 of its citizens the day before. 14 months later, the account looks different. The water still flows because India cannot yet stop it. The terrorism the abeyance was meant to end has not ended. Pakistan has not conceded; it has consolidated, litigated, and won every ruling. The treaty's court sits at The Hague issuing awards India will not read. And on both sides of the border, governments have talked themselves into positions, never restored, act of war, from which the paths lead downward.

This report has argued that the abeyance is a strategic blunder in the exact sense: a policy whose costs to its author exceed its benefits on every axis its author claims to value. It has argued that the gravest of those costs is measured in probability, the rising probability that a future crisis, arriving through a dry winter or another Pahalgam, will find the region without data, without a commission, without a sanctuary around water, with matured Indian storage works, with Pakistani missiles assigned to them, with two doctrines that do not connect, and with decision times measured in minutes. No single actor needs to choose catastrophe for catastrophe to arrive. That is what destroying institutions means. Institutions let states avoid being wise every single time.

The report also argues that the story does not end here. The treaty is only suspended, not dead; India has been careful, in its own legal interest, never to denounce it. The machinery at The Hague still turns. The World Bank's duties still stand. The SC's file is growing and in Pakistan's favour. The US has shown it can stop a war in this region in four days when it chooses to. The rivers themselves, indifferent to politics, continue to offer the two countries the same choice they offered in 1960: divide the waters by rule or fight over them by season.

65 years ago, two states that had just fought a war and would have fought two more in 1965 and 1971 signed an agreement so robust it outlived every government that touched it. They did so with the world's help because they could not do it alone. Nothing about that bargain's logic has expired. Only the price of failure has changed; it is now counted in warheads. The waters of the Indus have carried civilisations for 5000 years. Whether they now carry South Asia toward catastrophe or back toward sense is a decision, not a destiny, and the world is mandated and entitled, by the treaty's own birth certificate, to help make it well.

A last word belongs to the two publics, Indian and Pakistani, in whose names all of this is done. They are the same farmers on both sides of an invisible line in Punjab, planting the same wheat

in the same season with the same water from the same mountains. No Indian farmer's field is greener because a Pakistani field is dry, and no Pakistani harvest is saved by a threat against an Indian dam. The governments of both countries have spent a decade teaching these publics to see each other through gunsights, and the rivers, which have never recognised the border, are the latest classroom. The teaching can be stopped. It was stopped once before, in 1960, by leaders who liked each other no better than today's do, and the instrument they used is lying, suspended but intact, exactly where they left it.

Annex A: The Treaty's Key Provisions in Plain Language

For readers without the treaty text to hand, this report summarises the provisions below. The summary is descriptive only; the authentic text governs.

Table 6. The Indus Waters Treaty: Key Provisions in Plain Language

Provision	What it says, in plain terms
Article I	Defines the six rivers and the terms used in the treaty
Article II	Gives the three eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej) to India for unrestricted use
Article III	Obliges India to let the three western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab) flow to Pakistan, subject only to uses listed in the annexures
Article IV	General duties on both sides, including non-interference with drainage and maintenance of natural channels
Article V	Financial provisions, including India's fixed contribution to Pakistan's replacement works
Article VI	Requires regular exchange of hydrological data: daily gauge, discharge, and withdrawal figures
Article VII	Commits both sides to future cooperation and notice of new engineering works
Article VIII	Creates the Permanent Indus Commission, one commissioner each, meeting at least annually
Article IX	The dispute ladder: questions to the Commission, differences to a Neutral Expert, disputes to a Court of Arbitration
Article XII	The treaty enters into force on ratification and continues until terminated by a new treaty ratified by both governments; paragraph 3 allows modification, again only by a ratified treaty between the two governments
Annexure D	Detailed design rules for Indian run-of-the-river hydropower on the western rivers, including limits on pondage and on gates and outlets capable of controlling flow
Annexure E	Rules and limits for Indian storage on the western rivers, capped at about 3.6-million-acre feet in defined categories
Annexures F and G	Procedures for the Neutral Expert and the Court of Arbitration

Source: Author's summary of the 1960 treaty text.

Three points leap from the table. Article XII contains no exit or suspension; termination and modification both require the consent of both parties, which is why the Court of Arbitration found unilateral abeyance outside the treaty. Article VI is the data obligation whose breach, as Chapter Three argued, is the abeyance's most immediately harmful component. Annexure D's design limits are the subject of the May 2026 pondage award, which is why a technical question about reservoir operation has become a test of the treaty's survival.

Annex B: Extended Chronology, 2016 to 2026

Table 7. Extended Chronology, 2016 to 2026

Date	Event
September 2016	Uri attack: Prime Minister Modi states that blood and water cannot flow together; Permanent Indus Commission talks suspended for a period
2016 to 2018	India accelerates eastern-river utilisation projects to use its full entitlement
February 2019	Pulwama attack and Balakot air strike; Indian ministers pledge to stop Pakistan's share of eastern-river surplus
August 2019	Revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's constitutional autonomy
January 2023	India issues formal notice to Pakistan seeking modification of the treaty
July 2023	Court of Arbitration rules itself competent in the Kishanganga and Ratle proceedings; India boycotts
September 2024	India formally seeks review of the treaty; Pakistan requests continued compliance
2024	India calls off Permanent Indus Commission meetings
January 2025	Neutral Expert affirms competence over the design differences India raised
22 April 2025	Pahalgam attack kills 26 civilians
23 April 2025	India places the treaty in abeyance; Pakistan's National Security Committee declares stopping its waters an act of war
Early May 2025	Baglihar flow interruption; flushing at Salal; India suspends attendance at Neutral Expert meetings
7 to 10 May 2025	Operation Sindoor; Operation Bunyan um Marsoos; strikes on air bases on both sides; ceasefire of 10 May with United States engagement
21 June 2025	Home Minister Shah tells The Times of India the treaty "will never be restored"
27 June 2025	Court of Arbitration supplemental award: no unilateral abeyance; India rejects it
8 August 2025	Award on issues of general interpretation; India rejects it
10 August 2025	Pakistan's army chief, in Tampa, threatens to destroy any Indian dam built to block Pakistan's rivers
November 2025	Court decision clarifying the August award
January 2026	Pakistan convenes Security Council Arria-formula meeting on the treaty; India Hate Lab reports 1,318 hate speech events for 2025
March 2026	India tells UN World Water Day forum the abeyance continues; President Zardari calls India's actions a violation of the treaty's letter and spirit
April 2026	Foreign Minister Dar writes to the Security Council president on consequences for 240 million people
15 May 2026	Court of Arbitration award on maximum pondage; India rejects it as null and void

Date	Event
June 2026	Jaishankar and Patil reaffirm abeyance; Defence Minister Asif threatens war; Pakistan's second letter to the Security Council on Chenab diversion projects; India approves Dulhasti Stage II
30 June 2026	Indian sources deny Track II contacts and rule out treaty relief

Source: Compiled by the author from sources cited throughout the report.

Annex C: Glossary of Terms

Abeyance. Suspension or inactivity. India's chosen description of its 23 April 2025 action. The word has no defined meaning in the treaty or in treaty law.

Annexure D and Annexure E. The treaty's detailed rulebooks for Indian hydropower and storage on the western rivers.

Arria formula. An informal UNSC meeting format that allows discussion of matters not on the formal agenda. Pakistan used it for the treaty in January 2026.

Court of Arbitration. The treaty provides a seven-member tribunal for disputes over interpretation, seated at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague.

Full spectrum deterrence. Pakistan's nuclear posture, intended to deter threats at every level from battlefield to strategic.

Hydro-coercion. The use, or threatened use, of control over shared water to force political concessions from another state.

MAF, million acre-feet. The volume unit used in the treaty. One MAF is about 1.23 cubic kilometres of water.

MIRV. A missile payload of multiple warheads, each aimed at a separate target. Both India and Pakistan are developing the capability.

Neutral Expert. An engineer appointed through the World Bank to settle defined technical differences under the treaty.

No first use. India's declared policy of not using nuclear weapons unless first attacked with them. Pakistan makes no such pledge.

Permanent Indus Commission. The standing body of one commissioner from each country that managed the treaty's daily operation from 1960 until its suspension.

Pondage. The small working reserve of water behind a run-of-the-river dam, used to smooth daily generation.

Rabi and Kharif. The two cropping seasons of the subcontinent: rabi crops, such as wheat, are sown in autumn and harvested in spring; kharif crops, such as rice and cotton, are sown with the monsoon.

Run-of-the-river. A hydropower design that generates power from the river's natural flow with little storage.

Western and eastern rivers. The treaty divides the Indus system: Pakistan gets the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab; India gets the Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej.

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