

Rivers without Borders

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Rivers without Borders: Strategic Dimensions of India's Shared Waters

Why in the News?

- Following the **Pahalgam attack**, India has temporarily suspended the **Indus Water Treaty** with Pakistan, reviving the debate on water as a strategic tool in geopolitics.

Transboundary Waters of India

Transboundary waters are **aquifers, lakes, and river basins shared by two or more countries**. They account for **60% of global freshwater flows**.

Country	Major Shared Rivers	Agreements/Features
Pakistan	Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, Sutlej	Indus Waters Treaty (1960) - India gets eastern rivers, Pakistan western rivers
Bangladesh	Ganges, Brahmaputra, Teesta, Barak, Feni	Ganga Water Treaty (1996) , Teesta negotiations ongoing
Nepal	Kosi, Gandak, Mahakali (Sharda), Ghaghara	Sarada (1920), Kosi (1954), Gandak (1959), Mahakali Treaty (1996)
China	Indus, Sutlej, Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo)	Hydrological data-sharing agreements , no water-sharing treaty
Bhutan	Manas, Sankosh, Torsa, Amo Chu	Hydropower cooperation
Myanmar	Barak	Limited regional cooperation , no formal treaty

China's Capability to Influence Indian Waters

- **Tibet** is the origin of many key rivers (Indus, Sutlej, Brahmaputra).
- **Hydrological Infrastructure**: China has built dams and hydroelectric projects:

- **Senge Tsangpo, Ngari Shiquanhe (Indus source)**
 - **Barrage at Zada Gorge (Sutlej)**
 - **Control Tactics:**
 - Blocking rivers (e.g., **Galwan tributary** post-2020 conflict)
 - **Diversion plans**, though not implemented yet for Indus/Sutlej
 - **Data withholding:** Brahmaputra data blocked in 2017, hampered flood forecasting
 - **Artificial lakes:** Parechu River lake created in 2004, dubbed a “**water bomb**”
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Limitations on China's Leverage

- **Limited Origin Share:**
 - Only **10-15% of Indus** and **~20% of Sutlej** originate in China
 - **Himalayan Terrain:** Prone to earthquakes; large dam construction is risky
 - **International Water Laws:**
 - Violating flow norms could draw **global criticism**
 - **Downstream Impact:**
 - Blocking water affects **Pakistan and Bangladesh**, possibly turning them against China
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International Water Laws & Conventions

1. Helsinki Rules (1966)

- **Non-binding guidelines** by International Law Association

- Core Principles:

- **Equitable utilization**

- **No significant harm**

- Factors:

- Social/economic needs

- Drainage area

- Alternative water resources

- Cost of alternatives

2. UN Watercourses Convention (1997)

- Legally binding treaty; **entered into force in 2014**

- Covers **non-navigational use** (drinking, irrigation, hydropower)

- Obligations:

- **Equitable and reasonable use**

- **Prevent significant harm**

- **Sustainable management**

3. UN Water Convention (1992, Helsinki)

- Originally for Europe, **opened to all UN states in 2016**

- Goals:

- Sustainable transboundary water management
 - Peace promotion
 - Conflict prevention
 - Obligations:
 - Prevent, control, and reduce transboundary impacts
 - Equitable usage
 - Regional cooperation via **joint bodies**
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Conclusion

Water is increasingly becoming a **geopolitical tool** in India's neighborhood. While India and Pakistan have formal water-sharing treaties like the Indus Waters Treaty, tensions with **China**, which controls river origins in Tibet, reveal vulnerabilities. **Strategic cooperation**, adherence to **international norms**, and **regional diplomacy** are essential to safeguarding India's water security.

