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Pakistan: Water Crisis and the Indus Water Treaty

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 02/24/2017 - 09:08

Paper No. 6226

Dated 24-Feb-2017

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It is well known that Pakistan is one of the most “water stressed” countries of the world. Currently its per capita annual water capability is 1017 cubic metres- that is perilously close to a threshold of 1000 cubic metres. Back in 2009, it was 1500 cubic metres.

Water is one source that cannot be generated but can only be preserved. With its near total dependence on the glacial waters supplemented by not so bountiful precipitation, Pakistan faces a grim future in water management. This has been brought out by the UNDP in the Development Advocate- Pakistan of Vol. 3- December 2016. The contributors to this issue are mainly Pakistan water Management experts and not outsiders.

It was therefore no wonder that many in Pakistan both at the official, technical and media level reacted with alarm with a flurry of articles in the media with furious accusations against India, when the Indian Prime Minister soon after the “Uri Attack” declared that the Indus Water treaty of 1960 will be reviewed. There was no mention of annulment of the treaty as such- a treaty that had stood the test of many conflicts but the mere mention of a review of the treaty and the Indian Prime Minister’s remarks that blood and water cannot go together has rattled Pakistan.

Put simply, if only India observes the treaty in letter and spirit in fully utilising the waters allotted to it, Pakistan will be in serious trouble. This would need some explanation.

The Indus Water Treaty is unique in that the division of waters between India and Pakistan is not of waters as such but the division of the

rivers. Of these the western rivers- the Indus, Jhelum and the Chenab are for the exclusive use of Pakistan and the eastern rivers- Ravi, Beas and Sutlej are meant for use by India.

The treaty in its annexures acknowledged certain rights of Pakistan farmers to use the eastern rivers and similarly the Indian side can use a certain quantity of the western waters.

Though the Indian side is allowed to use 20 percent of the western rivers, it has hardly used more than 4 percent of the waters of the western rivers and more importantly Indian farmers have not fully utilised even the waters of eastern rivers either, thus letting the waters flow freely into Pakistan. Ironic that Indian Punjab would let go waters to Pakistan than share some with their own brethren in Haryana!

The Indus Treaty does not permit India to build storage dams on the rivers meant for Pakistan but allowed to make limited use for power generation. This would mean “run of the river schemes” which would still need some limited storage. The Baglihar project as well as two other projects, the Kishenganga and the Satle which have been objected to by Pakistan and seeking the World Bank Help for arbitration are all “run of the river schemes”, fully justified in the treaty.

The Baglihar project that was objected to by Pakistan was examined in detail earlier by a neutral expert. He had suggested a reduction of the dam’s height by 1.5 metres but did not object to the right of India to construct dams- a point that has been lost sight of by Pakistan and its media. The neutral expert did not even call the issue as one of a “dispute” but one of “differences.”

The Kishenganga project is a run of the river scheme located at Bandipur in J & K with a projected capacity of 330 MW. This case was once taken earlier by Pakistan to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague. The PCA ruled that India can divert a minimum quantity of water for power generation and upheld India’s right to divert the Western Waters meant for Pakistan in a “non consumptive” manner. It also added that a minimum amount of water should be retained in the river to maintain the domestic environment downstream in Pakistan where another project- the same river being called Neelum is being built.

The Indus Treaty clearly lays down the procedure for settling disputes between the parties- firstly the issue has to be discussed bilaterally at the commission level- then go for a neutral expert to examine the case to be appointed and later by the World Bank if both approach the Bank jointly. Then comes arbitration if both parties approach the World Bank or if the issue is not heading towards any resolution.

India’s contention was that the objections raised by Pakistan are technical in nature and can be resolved bilaterally. Pakistan has now gone for arbitration of the two projects- the Kishenganga and the Satle Projects.

The World Bank in its wisdom tried to please both the parties- by going for arbitration and in appointing a neutral expert- a contradictory move that pleased neither. India has strongly objected to World Bank's initiative for "arbitration" where the differences are only technical.

Pakistan had also approached the Obama administration and now is getting China involved as part of "water security" in the CPEC project of China. It is to be noted that neither the US nor China has any locus standi in the disputes arising out of the Indus Water Treaty. Even the World Bank comes in not as a guarantor but as a "facilitator."

We now go back to the UNDP publication that gives a clear and succinct situational analysis of the water sector of Pakistan. A few points that need to be highlighted.

- The Indus Water Treaty has failed to address two issues namely- the division of shortages in the dry years between India and Pakistan and the cumulative impact of storages on the flows of Chenab River into Pakistan.
- While water availability is restricted with the current population at 190 million (2016), an increase of 14.2 percent of water will be required by 2025 when the population would increase to 217 million. The demand would also increase with higher demand for multiple water uses.
- The storage capacity of waters for Pakistan is only for 30 days compared to say the Colorado river which is 900 days.
- Glaciers constitute a huge reservoir of fresh water to the area. The river flows are highly variable and give rise to water crisis frequently.
- Ninety two percent of the country is semi-arid to arid.
- Pakistan has been negligent in conducting a sound analysis and delays in presenting cases to the Indus Water Commission or World Bank have caused the issue to hang loose and remain unaddressed.
- Water has been highly politicised in Pakistan and there is an extreme deficit of trust among the provinces. (Sadly it is true in India too)

Most of the points are internal except the suggestion that India should share the deficit of the western rivers with Pakistan during lean season. This goes against the very concept of the Indus Water Treaty that foresaw such controversial problems that would arise when waters are to be shared and not the rivers. The present arrangement is the best and it is for Pakistan to find alternate means to manage its resources rather than asking India to share its "poverty." And why should India- as the Prime Minister of India has pointed out- when Blood and Water do not go together.

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