

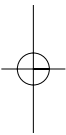


**WATER POLITICS IN SOUTH ASIA:
TECHNOCRATIC COOPERATION
AND LASTING SECURITY IN THE
INDUS BASIN AND BEYOND**

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Water, like religion and ideology, has the power to move millions of people. Since the very birth of human civilization, people have moved to settle close to it. People move when there is too little of it. People move when there is too much of it. People journey down it. People write, sing and dance about it. People fight over it. All people, everywhere and every day, need it.

—Mikhail Gorbachev¹



The distribution of environmental resources as a potential contributor to conflict has been the subject of considerable research, and these linkages have dominated the post-Cold War interest in environmental security.² Within this genre much attention has been given to water resources, owing to their vital importance for human survival. The distribution of environmental resources may contribute to conflict, but recent scholarship has begun to focus on the potential of environmental threats in stimulating conflict resolution.³ Uniting around a common aversion to environmental threats, as well as confidence-building through environmental cooperation, potentially hold great appeal for policymakers who aim to engage in proactive problem-solving rather than in precise problem identification. What is most significant for government decisionmakers to consider is that even if a conflict is not environmental in nature, the remedy may well be achieved through environmental means. Environmental cooperation may offer pathways to confidence-building or peacebuilding, whether or not the conflict has environmental roots.

This essay explores the potentiality of such instrumental cooperation in the case of South Asia where regional conflict between two nuclear neighbors, India and Pakistan, is predicated in a history of religious rivalries and post-colonial demarcation. Despite inveterate antagonism, the two countries have managed to cooperate over

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water resources of the Indus River. How was this riparian cooperation enabled? And can it be reconfigured to provide for lasting peace in the region?

ANATOMY OF THE INDUS WATERS TREATY

The Indian subcontinent quite literally owes its name to the waters of one river—the Indus. Regional politics are closely tied to the river’s history and how different societies have used its waters for livelihood and for consolidating power. Hindu nationalists frequently recount that the very essence of their faith, dating back to the writings of the Rigveda in the second millennium B.C.E., is linked to the flow of the Indus. The name itself is a Latinized version of *Sindhu*, which means river in ancient Sanskrit, and from which the word “Hindu” and its concomitant ethnoreligious identity emerged.⁴ The partition of the subcontinent by the British in 1947 gave all but the very upper headwaters of the Indus to the newly formed Muslim majority country of Pakistan. More significantly, the major tributaries of the Indus that provided irrigation water for the fertile and densely populated region of Punjab on both sides of the border were divided. This was a classic conflict situation between upstream and downstream riparians, exacerbated by a lack of trust and intense territorial animosity between the two sides. This led to a series of disputes related to the Indus and its tributaries. Both countries tried to settle the matter bilaterally several times after partition but no lasting agreement was reached until the World Bank got involved as a mediating entity.

The resulting agreement, known as the Indus Waters Treaty, took nine years to negotiate and was signed in 1960. It is a particularly remarkable treaty since both sides have otherwise had tremendous hostility for one another and have defied efforts at cooperation. It is therefore instructive to consider the development and history of the treaty in greater detail as a potential model for regional environmental cooperation. The treaty is often cited as a success story of international riparian engagement, as it has withstood major wars between the two signatories (in 1965 and 1971), several skirmishes over water distribution and derivative territorial concerns.⁵ The agreement is also heralded as a triumph for the World Bank, which played an instrumental role in its negotiation during the height of the Cold War. The World Bank’s role in this region was particularly unusual because India was a vanguard of the Nonaligned-Movement and wanted to disavow any pressure from international institutions or Western nations.

The initiator and technical adviser of the agreement was David Lilienthal, the former head of the United States’ Tennessee Valley Authority, who suggested that an engineering perspective could contribute to resolving this political stalemate.⁶ After a visit to India and Pakistan in 1951, he advised the two countries to divide the Indus Basin geographically. India would have unrestricted use of the three eastern