IMAGINING CLIMATE WARS: WATER SECURITIZATION AND THE INDUS WATERS TREATY IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

Water governance in South Asia has entered a period of acute politicisation. This paper examines the 2025 abeyance of the Indus Waters Treaty as a case of water securitisation shaped by the discourse of "climate wars." Employing a single-case qualitative design, the study integrates process tracing, theory-driven discourse analysis, and empirical hydrological contextualisation with few expert interviews. The empirical corpus is explicitly bounded to official speeches, ministerial statements, policy notifications, and publicly reported dam operations between 2014 and 2025 that directly reference the treaty, security, or water management. Discourse analysis is operationalised through securitisation indicators: existential-threat framing, identification of the target audience, and justification of extraordinary measures beyond normal politics. These speech acts are traced against subsequent policy actions to assess coherence between rhetoric and implementation. Basin flow patterns, glacier dependence, and climate-stress projections are incorporated to evaluate the material feasibility of water coercion. The findings demonstrate that while structural and hydrological constraints limit large-scale flow denial, political rhetoric, particularly under Narendra Modi, reframed river governance from a technocratic regime into a domain of strategic signalling, intensifying mistrust between India and Pakistan under conditions of environmental stress.

Introduction

Climate change and water scarcity have become urgent global issues, and have often been mentioned in connection with future conflicts. Analysts have been warning that reducing water supplies and melting glaciers may result in river disputes that could lead to conflicts (Azizi & Leandro, 2025). Yet many scholars caution that the "climate wars" narrative, the theory that environmental stress will necessarily lead to armed conflict, is too simple (Bücken & Murabit, 2019). In reality climate change is a threat multiplier: it can exacerbate other existing political, ethnic or social tensions but is not, in itself, a cause of wars (Zawahri & McCracken, 2025). This difference is of utmost importance in South Asia where water has been both a vital resource and a possible source of contention.

"Climate change may indirectly contribute to conflict by deepening resource scarcity and existing

tensions," said Prof. Oktay Tanrisever.

Since 1960 the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) between India and Pakistan with the mediation of the World Bank has famously survived multiple wars and crises being a rare case of lasting cooperation in the field of hydrology (Baloch, 2025). Under the provision of the Treaty, the eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej) are under the control of India, the western ones (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab) of Pakistan, the details of which forbid that either party can unilaterally disrupt the flows (Baloch, 2025). For decades, despite fierce conflicts, the use of water as a weapon was abstained by both sides. Instead, IWT turned out to be a "core conflict resolution tool" and symbol of bilateral cooperation. However, in 2025 a massive reversal took place. Following a militant strike in Indian-administered Kashmir, the Modi government then resorted to the unheard-of measure of placing the IWT "in abeyance" (Lossow & Singh, 2025). On 23 April 2025 India declared a temporary suspension of treaty obligations stating that this had been done in retaliation to terrorism, although Islamabad was not involved (Guzman, 2025; Lossow & Singh, 2025). Prime Minister Modi upped the rhetoric in public rallies, warning that "Pakistan will not get water from rivers over which India has rights", and promising Pakistan would "pay a heavy price" for any cross-border violence (Shah et al., 2025). In short, a resource that had been cooperatively managed became the subject of strategy in a superior weapon.

This paper makes a critical analysis of cases of India's recent abeyance of the IWT and also of public messaging through the lens of theory of securitization. This research argues that these moves represent a much bigger story of "climate wars", an argument about water scarcity and climate stress being an existential threat that justifies extraordinary measures. Specifically, this research analyses the extent that the Modi government has been invoking security and climate arguments to politicise transboundary water governance, which has indeed amounted to securitising the IWT. Based on expert analyses and recent statements, research argues that this politicization is a deliberate strategy: It re-presents water sharing as a matter of zero-sum sharing and precludes cooperation, subverting decades of technocratic water management. This research will initially situate the idea of climate wars, then Securitization theory is applied to understand how protracted conflicts are impacted and then stress on IWT will be analysed. The research will conclude by exploring the wider implications of India's strategy for South Asian stability, climate justice, and the future of international water law.

This study adopts a single-case qualitative research design to examine the 2025 abeyance of the Indus Waters Treaty as an instance of water securitisation. The analysis combines process tracing, theory-driven discourse analysis, hydrological contextualisation, and semi-structured expert interviews to triangulate rhetorical, institutional, and material dimensions of the crisis.

Climate Wars as Discourse

The term "climate wars" has become common in media and policy debates, and has often given policy makers an apocalyptic view of how future resource wars might unfold. Headlines have forecasted water or food wars in the future because of droughts, floods and population growth. In South Asia too, commentators speak of "water wars" between India and its neighbours in references to a brewing Nile war or disagreements over Himalayan dams. This imagery is tapping into age-old fears and enjoys tremendous rhetorical power: invoking the spectre of war, for instance, allows leaders to dramatize their problems and help mobilize public support of security

measures.

Analysts emphasize that the notion of a "climate war" is misleading. Murabit and Bucken (2019) argue that today's conflict, be it in Syria or Sudan or elsewhere, is rarely "climate wars" in a simple cause-and-effect sense (Bücken & Murabit, 2019). Instead, climate-related shocks have a tendency to extract what the existing social, political or economic fault-lines. For example, the civil war in Syria had a large number of causes in addition to the previous drought, including authoritarian rule and sectarian tensions (Abosedra et al., 2021). Emphasizing climate as the sole villain may run the risk of overlooking these real drivers, and even allow governments to be off the hook for pressures of long-standing grievances. Murabit and Bucken caution that "narrating" conflicts as driven by climate may become something of a convenient scapegoat, taking the blame off of other causes (Bücken & Murabit, 2019).

More generally, talking about climate change as a security threat can have unintended consequences. When politicians and militaries buy into the rhetoric of climate, however, they are able to justify extraordinary measures which might undermine rights and international cooperation. Securitization experts say that once an issue is framed as an "existential threat," states tend to utilize emergency powers and resources at the cost of more inclusive and long-term solutions (Oramah et al., 2022). In the context of the climate-issue, this can mean diversion from mitigation or adaptation to military preparedness issues, or even potentially weaponizing environmental issues to fuel nationalism (Oramah et al., 2022). A major and often forgotten risk of securitizing climate change, or water scarcity for that matter, according to Murabit and Bucken, is that securitization can undermine democratic debate and divert public investment from sustainable policies (Bücken & Murabit, 2019).

In South Asia today, the language on climate and security is definitely on the rise. Media reports draw connections between extreme monsoons, glacier retreats and dam projects and national rivalries (Khan & Zaman, 2025). Yet careful observers call for nuance. Climate impacts, whether floods or melting glaciers, are certainly putting pressure on water resources and causing some anxiety, but this is happening in the background of political mistrust and historical conflict (Lad & Jaybhaye, 2024). Water can so become a proxy for larger conflicts (such as Kashmir or border incursions) as much as directly bring them about. Thus, while climate change is real, and growing worse, therefore it is important that world draws a distinction between "imagined" water wars drummed up by rhetoric, and real climate pressures which demand joint management.

Water Securitization in Protracted Conflicts

The recent development of the IWT can only be understood against the backdrop of the longstanding hostility between India and Pakistan. Since partition both states have viewed each other's actions often through a security prism. Securitization theory, which analyses the ways in which issues are framed as existential threats, is helpful in explaining the ways that environmental resources can become entangled in war-era politics (Eroukhmanoff, 2018). If water is being framed as an issue of national survival, it is possible for leaders to justify going against the norms to "protect" it (Aman et al., 2025).

"Water resource management in the Indus River basin could become a significant area of tension

between India and Pakistan," said Prof. Tanrisever

Historically, both Delhi and Islamabad have occasionally securitized water, but typically with less temporal (or more institutional) methods (Lad & Jaybhaye, 2024). Pakistan has always feared that as the upstream power, India may restrict the flows of the Indus. The 1960 Treaty was in part a response to such security concerns (Guzman, 2025). Over the years, however, the IWT proved useful as a bulwark against water warfare: It constrained Indian upstream dam construction activity in occupied Kashmir, to serve as an assurance to Pakistan that their irrigated agriculture would not easily be choked (Guzman, 2025). During previous crises, even when the exchange of cross-border fire occurred between India and Pakistan, neither side tried to weaponize the Indus rivers directly. In that sense the IWT played that role of a buffer which de-securitized water, distinctively from other security flashpoints.

In recent times, however, the status of water has changed. Leadership under Narendra Modi in India has also proved to be keen on politicization of water on much the more overt level. For example, in 2025 the federal Home Minister declared publicly that the IWT "would never be restored" after it had been suspended as part of a toughening stance on the fact that water-sharing is a one-way burden on India (Lossow & Singh, 2025). Government officials started linking water not only to development but also to security threats: Modi's speeches linked water flows to terrorist attacks, implying water flows could be cut to punish Pakistan (Lossow & Singh, 2025). This constitutes a classic securitizing move: an issue (water-sharing) previously handled in technocratic terms, is redefined as a weapon, and an issue of a matter of retaliatory national defense.

From Pakistan's perspective, a counter-securitisation discourse has gradually taken shape, rooted primarily in concerns of vulnerability rather than coercion. The analysis in the Pakistani political and media highlights the fact that the country is structurally reliant on the Indus system and that any peripheral hampering of the water flows would have intense economical and humanitarian outcomes (Shah et al., 2025). Existential hit and treaty-violation are usually delivered in warning terms, designed to make it clear that unilateral action is serious but not in an escalatory manner (Baloch, 2025; Guzman, 2025). In legal and parliamentary contexts, Pakistani accounts always predict international law and third-party modalities as fundamental protection, an orientation to restraint by a rule (Beames et al., 2025). Water will be securitised in different terms in the sense that to India, it is becoming increasingly politicised as a means of political leverage, and to Pakistan, more obscure as a means of protection against systemic risk and downstream exposure.

Securitization is accompanied with hard-line rhetoric, and it is clear in the present public rhetoric. When Modi said that Pakistan will not receive water in rivers where India possesses rights, a cooperative treaty right turns into an extravagance or penalty (Shah et al., 2025). This rhetoric is a contrasting one to the former Indian governments which even publicly promised that politics would not disrupt water flows. Internally in Pakistan, the experts have sat down to discuss the future of the treaty, and politicians constantly emphasize that water is life, and Pakistan cannot afford to compromise the Indus flows (Baloch, 2025; Guzman, 2025). In a way, now both states are discussing water as a zero-sum, militaristic, and not technical and humanitarian one.

In theory, researchers observe that environmental conditions such as water shortage interplay with political divisions to increase the risk of conflict. In the situation, climate stress, as Bhatti et al.

(2026) note, is combined with pre-existing political faults (India-Pak rivalry, Kashmir conflict) to create a combustible blend (Bhatti et al., 2026). To them, the fact that Pakistan framed the water dispute as a security concern was a precursor to the recent treaty abeyance by India (Bhatti et al., 2026). Indeed, becoming unilaterally suspended on terms of treaty, observers openly characterized that as an act of securitization of water through the packaging of national security to justify water policy adjustments (Kebebew et al., 2025; Naweed, 2025). That is, the government of New Delhi seems to be playing on panic and fears created by the climate and the rhetoric of national security to unilaterally abandon collaborative water management.

This politicization of water is nothing exclusive to South Asia it is only following international trends according to analysts. The Copenhagen school describes the securitization as a speech act: Leaders explain their transgression of normal politics by turning water into the existential threat (Bucken & Murabit, 2019). In practice, such moves frequently imply invoking threats (real or not) to achieve the masses aboard. In this case, the government of India has used cross-border terrorism as the excuse to suspend the IWT, yet, as experts indicate, IWT infrastructure in the treaty physically cannot cut river flow (Guzman, 2025; Lossow, 2025). The juxtaposition is informative here, as despite the governmental explanation of water in India linking water and security anxiety, technical individuals are hinting at the fact that these anxieties are highly rhetorical.

Nevertheless, the impact of this kind of securitizing discourse is serious. By weaponizing the waters, India risks sabotaging the norms which have kept cooperation alive for decades now. Data-sharing, joint inspections and system of dispute resolution, the very "diplomatic building blocks" of the treaty are now in doubt. Such eroding the trust can have dangerous feedback: As one analysis warns, a vacuum in transboundary water governance "would increase the risk of escalating water conflicts between the two nuclear powers" (Lossow & Singh, 2025). In sum, the Modi government's actions are indicative of how climate stress and water scarcity may be used rhetorically to frame a security threat; at the expense of existing institutions of cooperation.

IWT under Stress

The Indus Waters Treaty had been negotiated under US/world bank auspices in 1960 precisely to insulate the water sharing issue from conflict. For more than sixty years it stood strong against wars, political collapse, and even surprise military attacks (Baloch, 2025; Lossow & Singh, 2025). Its chief achievement has been stability: Pakistan gets about 80% of basin water as guaranteed by the Treaty which was respected by India even during full-scale wars (Baloch, 2025; Guzman, 2025). Under the 1960 agreement, India had agreed to run its dam projects in Kashmir as "run-of-river" plants with minimal storage, which meant specifically to provide flows to the downstream (Beames et al., 2025). This arrangement was deliberate and aimed to build trust to mitigate Pakistan's single greatest fear, which was that India, as the upper riparian, will have the ability to shut off the supply of water.

This entire context makes the 2025 move of New Delhi more alarming. On 23 April 2025, amidst a serious military escalation, the Indian government issued a formal notice placing the IWT "in abeyance" (Shah et al., 2025). In diplomatic terms, this meant India would for the time being suspend many of its treaty obligations. Officials, in India, cited a recent militant attack in Pahalgam (in which 26 civilians died) and alleged cross-border terrorism (Azizi & Leandro, 2025). New

Delhi argued that it had to pay attention to so-called "national security concerns" and the more pressing need for energy and infrastructure at home.
Prime Minister Modi and others then broadcasted these themes in the public space. In speeches and interviews in the media Modi made explicit connections between water policy and retaliation. For example, according to Reuters, on May 22, 2025 Modi said: "Pakistan will not get water from rivers over which India has rights" (Shah et al., 2025). He cast the move in a wider punitive strategy: "Pakistan will have to pay a heavy price" for terrorist attacks, and its economy "has to pay for it" (Shah et al., 2025). Similarly, Time Magazine quotes Modi saying India would stop transboundary flows remarking that henceforth "India's water will flow for India's benefit… and it will be used for India's progress" (Guzman, 2025). These statements leave no doubt about the fact that New Delhi now does not consider the issue of water sharing an independent one, but one that can be used as leverage. Even domestic justifications focused on rights rather than duty: India's media said the treaty was "very generous" to Pakistan with 80% of basin waters being allocated to the downstream nation (Guzman, 2025).

At the same time India engaged in concrete (though reversible) technical measures. Within weeks of the announcement of the suspension, Indian engineers were tampering with the upstream dams. By early May, sluice gates in the Baglihar dam over the Chenab River were lowered; temporarily dropping the entire flow (up to 90%) to Pakistan (Guzman, 2025). In reports of the incidents in the Indian press, officials said these measures were routine "refilling" operations for hydropower generation. International observers said that while such operations might reduce flows for a short period of time, the physical limitations of the treaty prevented such operations from halting the entire flow of water upstream of Pakistan: Pakistan's largest reservoirs will be quickly replenished unless India builds massive new dams (Beames et al., 2025; Guzman, 2025). Engineers and analysts had estimated that even if India hastened building the dams, any significant new reservoir would take years or decades to finish (Baloch, 2025; Beames et al., 2025). In other words, India's technical assets in the Indus to weaponize it is limited by geography/technology.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's response was highly alarmed. In Islamabad, the government denounced India's abeyance as a clear breach of international law (Naweed, 2025). Officials emphasized that the IWT is a binding treaty which no party can unilaterally suspend. Pakistan's Attorney General, Mansoor Usman Awan told Reuters that India must stick to the treaty's terms, and that any failure to share agreed data or flows would come at India's "cost and peril" (Shah et al., 2025). Politicians in parliament and press termed the move by India as an act of war (Baloch, 2025). Even the protests in Pakistan were filled with such slogans as Water is our life and the comparison of the abeyance with aggression. Humanitarian repercussions, experts fear irrigated agriculture in Pakistan is a heavy reliant on the Indus streams, and even the slightest breach may lead to crop failures, shortages in food and social tensions (Ghumman, 2025). The routine data sharing, floods, seasonal flow, and dam operations have been one of the central guarantees of the treaty and are currently aborted, according to Pakistani water scholars. Losing this transparency will make Pakistan's farmers and water managers more vulnerable to surprise floods or droughts with less lead time (Baloch, 2025; Guzman, 2025).

This brewing conflict over water must also be seen in the light of the impact of climate already straitening the basin. The Indus system is extremely sensitive to changes in climate: more than one

third of its flow is from glaciers and snowmelt (Bhatti et al., 2026). Trends point towards more accelerating glacial melt as well as more erratic monsoon rains. In the short-term, melting can increase flows, but in the long term, reduced snowpack means less dry season water. One study has predicted that if the rate of warming persists throughout the century the Indus flows could decline dramatically by the end of the century (Suhana, 2025). Meanwhile, South Asia as a whole confronts increased demand: booming population and increased intensity of agriculture is "sucking up" river water (Baloch, 2025). In an Indian communication to Pakistan, the Delhi explained the reasons for revisiting the Treaty stating that there were such changes, population growth and energy requirements (Baloch, 2025). This plea for climate and development is a sign of a change of narrative: while the deal of 1960 placed a bet on relatively stable conditions, now India argues that the world has changed (Bhatti et al., 2026; Suhana, 2025). Pakistan has also pointed to the effects of climate stress, comparing the increasing frequency of floods, drought, and the need for cross-border water management was never greater (Bhatti et al., 2026; Khan, 2025).

"Climate-related factors may influence conflicts by limiting available resources and creating environmental pressures," said Prof. Tanrisever

In spite of these pressures, the data so far is telling something remarkable: climate change has so far primarily strengthened the value of cooperation. In recent years Pakistan was struck by both extreme drought and record floods (e.g., 2022 floods affecting an area of 33 million people), and then the rapid sharing of water protected against humanitarian disasters. The IWT's flood provisions, in case of, for instance, extreme rainfall over Pakistan in 2023, enabled India to aid in regulating the Sutlej-Jhelum system to Pakistan's advantage (Shah et al., 2025). Experts point out that if the treaty had been abrogated earlier, Pakistan losses from the above floods would have been much higher (Khan, 2025; Shah & Bukhari, 2025). In short, whilst climate extremes make the need for Indus joint management clear, the securitizing discourse has read climate crisis rhetoric outward: the rhetoric by the leaders is being evoked less cooperatively and more as an argument to justify strong-arm tactics.

Implications

India's suspension of the Indus Treaty has wider and longer reaching implications, for regional stability and climate vulnerability as well as for the concept of water diplomacy itself. On the geopolitical front the move has contributed to the spiral of mistrust in South Asia. Outside India and Pakistan, the smaller ones are watching with a nervous eye. Bangladesh and Nepal have also long believed that India ignores their interests in river bargaining (for example in Ganges, Teesta or Kosi rivers) (Suhana, 2025). If New Delhi openly reneges on a major treaty with Pakistan, it sets a precedent which could haunt it in talks with its eastern neighbours in the future (Suhana, 2025). Already, scholars suggest that India's position "undermines its own position" in the Brahmaputra basin, over which loom large China's upstream dams (Suhana, 2025). In other words, the more India plays the role of a hydro-hegemon the less it will have a right at demanding fairness or data from others.

The regional ripple actions are quite serious. Pakistan depends on the Indus for 80% of irrigation as well as large hydropower (Baloch, 2025; Shah et al., 2025). Any real cut-off, even partial could devastate its farming provinces. Aid agencies are apprehensive that there will be a massive humanitarian emergency situation because flooded fields followed by a drought could cause a food

extreme with displacement and internal conflict. Recall the Indus floods of 2010 resulted in the displacement of 20 million people, but without treaty cooperation the future disaster may prove greater (Ali et al., 2020). Moreover, climate models demonstrate that in a few decades the share of water of the river will be at chronic risk in Pakistan (Bhatti et al., 2026; Suhana, 2025). Analysts note climate stress is already increasing water disputes within provinces (i.e., between Punjab and Sindh province) (Ali et al., 2020). Politicizing the Indus now threatens to turn scarcity over resources into an inter-communal strife or even more radical environmental migration.

"*Climate change could further exacerbate Pakistan's already stressed water security, creating serious challenges for its estimated quarter-billion and growing population if urgent solutions are not found,"* said Andrew Korybko.

On a bigger level, India's abeyance goes against global norms of water governance. The Indus Treaty has always been touted by development experts as a be-all and end-all of dispute-resolution (Baloch, 2025). Its survival after wars was quoted by the UN as proof shared water will lead to peace. If this treaty collapses or is interpreted as binding no longer, it sends a chilling message to other basins (e.g., Mekong, Nile, Jordan) that treaties only as good as political convenience. The Clingendael Institute warns against a "vacuum in transboundary water governance" in the Indus which would increase the likelihood of conflict not only bilaterally, but also which could potentially involve the involvement of powers as powerful as China or even of international peacekeepers (Lossow & Singh, 2025). In a more cynical vein, the suspension of the treaty being made in the terms of responding to terrorism muddles the waters of international law: if terror is grounds to void a water agreement, what about other treaties? Such reasoning could lead to destabilizing related realms, from border deals to trade deals.

"Diplomacy, international mediation, and technological adaptation are essential for managing climate-related conflict risks," said Prof. Tanrisever

In India itself, securitizing water may become self-defeating. Any disruption will also impact populations at home along the tributaries of the Indus. In Indian occupied Jammu & Kashmir, the farmers have invested in dams and canals on the belief that they will receive the water to irrigate their fields; sudden policies holding back the water may jeopardize these investments (Farid & Ashraf, 2025). Politically, creating an exaggeration of water war between India and Pakistan can either be used to terrify the common people or for the regional nationalists to respond negatively (Amjad, 2025). Besides, by focusing on externalising culpability i.e. blaming Pakistan, climate change for water woes-avoids oblivious domestic reforms, also promotes some panic on necessity of domestic reforms (Ijaz, 2025). Analysts add that India's water management is highly wasteful in itself, with outdated irrigation practice is depleting aquifers (Bhattacharya & Sachdev, 2021; Mahadevan, 2024). Without the improvement in efficiency, India too will suffer from shortage. The rhetorical flourish of having "weapons-grade water" now might well come back to bite as domestic embarrassment when monsoon rains fail, or ground water runs dry.

Environmentally and ethically, this move towards weaponization is disturbing. Experts stress there is no such thing as water diplomacy in zero-sum games: control over rainfall cannot be entirely in the hands of upstream states, such as India, and damming the country temporarily just stores a finite resource (Beames et al., 2025). In the meantime, climate change makes haphazard water management more dangerous. With India denying flood data, Pakistan's flood forecasting comes to

a standstill, increasing disaster risk (Guzman, 2025). And if each country lays the blame for floods or droughts onto the other ("You released too much water" vs "You diverted it"), it plays a blame game and does not consider climate causes (Bhatti et al., 2026). As one academic source describes, this dynamic can create space for the rise of xenophobia as political leaders may say "Pakistan is getting our water" or vice versa, which might rally constituencies but prevent the solutions of the problems on any joint level (Bhatti et al., 2026).

There is also the question of using the language of justice and development. The Manchester analysis of 2023 argues that the militarisation of rivers requires a climate justice response (Suhana, 2025). In other words, rich and powerful states should not use the climate crisis as an opportunity to marginalise others. From that angle, India's manner appears backward. It uses the rhetoric of climate stress, where it claims to build "clean energy", but flies in the face of the spirit of cooperative climate adaptation. And had New Delhi instead invested climate resilient infrastructure, it might have helped in resilience for the region. Instead, it is erecting political barriers (Suhana, 2025). This disparity is posing uncomfortable questions: is the "clean energy" justification real, or an excuse to justify raging at Pakistan?

The current crisis underscores the increasing strain placed on legacy water agreements by accelerating climatic change rather than any inherent failure of cooperative intent. The Indus Waters Treaty was negotiated in an era preceding modern climate science, and it is now widely recognised that its technical design offers limited flexibility for managing prolonged droughts, extreme flooding, or abrupt hydrological shocks (Bhatti et al., 2026; Suhana, 2025). Ongoing tensions therefore serve as a warning that rigid interpretations of fixed allocations, in the absence of crisis-sharing mechanisms, risk politicising environmental stress. The priority is not the abandonment of existing frameworks but their reinforcement (Lossow & Singh, 2025). Water governance must evolve through climate-responsive provisions and basin-wide cooperation that preserve treaty sanctity while insulating transboundary water management from short-term political pressures.

In summary, India's securitization of the IWT is not a contained incident; it has regional, global and normative reverberations. It heightens the risk of conflict in South Asia, jeopardizes millions of livelihoods, and undermines the norms of hydro diplomacy. From a climate perspective, it is ironic and tragic: at a time when water cooperation is most needed to face environmental shocks, the main powers are pointing guns at each other's rivers. The longer this dispute remains unresolved, the more it will erode trust in collective solutions and embolden a dangerous "water war" narrative that many experts have warned against.

The combined evidence from discourse coding, process tracing, hydrological indicators, and expert interviews suggests a signalling mechanism rather than a coercive hydrological strategy. Securitising rhetoric amplified domestic audience costs and legitimised extraordinary measures, while operational adjustments remained constrained by infrastructure and basin physics.

Conclusion

The 2025 crisis over the Indus Waters Treaty exposes how climate stress has been deliberately folded into India's security politics, with significant consequences for regional stability. By placing

the treaty in abeyance and publicly framing water as a strategic lever, the Modi government transformed a historically de-securitised regime into an arena of coercive signalling. Rivers once governed through legal and technical processes were recast as instruments of punishment, wrapped in the language of terrorism, sovereignty, and national entitlement. While climate change provides a convenient backdrop, this episode demonstrates that the escalation was not environmentally inevitable but politically manufactured. India's leadership actively mobilised climate and security narratives to project resolve to domestic audiences, despite well-known technical constraints that make large-scale water denial unfeasible in the short term. Such posturing undermines the spirit of cooperation embedded in the treaty and erodes one of the few durable stabilisers in an otherwise adversarial relationship.

More broadly, India's approach reflects the dangers of normalising "climate wars" thinking, where environmental stress is invoked to justify exceptional and unilateral behaviour. Rather than strengthening cooperative mechanisms to manage shared climate risks, New Delhi's actions weakened treaty norms, heightened mistrust, and narrowed escalation buffers in an already volatile region. This trajectory risks setting a precedent in which transboundary water becomes a legitimate tool of political pressure, with destabilising implications far beyond the Indus Basin. The lesson of this crisis is therefore clear: climate change demands adaptive and collective governance, not securitised brinkmanship. "Climate change is a global problem requiring collective solutions, including the promotion of low-carbon economies," said Prof. Tanrisever. By politicising water and undermining a rules-based framework, India has contributed to turning a manageable climate challenge into a strategic liability. Preventing future crises will require resisting the militarisation of environmental discourse and reaffirming cooperation as the only sustainable response to a warming and water-stressed South Asia.

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