**Need for Water Security in Pakistan**

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March 3, 2023

Pakistan is facing what can be termed the direst moment in its 75 years of history. The nation lies on the brink of an economic default as its foreign reserves have fallen to $2.9 billion. Successive governments blame each other for the economic quagmire facing Pakistan. However, the actual cause is the structural and institutional failings in Pakistan. A major aspect of these deficiencies is reflected in the lack of proper implementation of the water security policy in the country.

Water security means having reliable access to an acceptable quantity and quality of water. Water security in Pakistan faces three major threats, namely: too much water, i.e. floods; too little water, i.e. droughts; and polluted water. The IMF ranks Pakistan as the third most water-stressed country in the world, with UNDP stating that the country will reach absolute water scarcity by 2025. Despite such a dismal state of affairs, the country faces flooding on a nearly annual basis. The most prominent example of this is the 2022 floods, which cost the nation $30 billion in flood damage and economic losses. Moreover, this is not a new phenomenon. According to the Federal Flood Commission, Pakistan has witnessed some 30 major floods since 1950, which have cost Pakistan untold billions.

The floods that Pakistan is suffering from today, however, are among the most extreme in its history. This fact can be attributed to the disastrous consequences of climate change. Pakistan has the highest number of glaciers, anywhere in the world outside of the poles. This is especially threatening to the country as global temperatures rise and there is increased flooding due to the nearly exponential melt of the Himalayan glaciers. A report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) shows that the Himalayan Glaciers have already lost about 40% of their area in the last several hundred years and the process is only expected to increase its pace.

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Another facet that adds to the necessity of a robust water security policy is the spectre that has hounded Pakistan’s security thinkers since its creation, i.e. India. Pakistan is dependent upon the Indus River for nearly 95.8% of its renewable water. India, being an upper riparian state, has the ability, if not the capacity, to completely block this vital supply of water from the Himalayas. Additionally, Pakistan only has a water storage capacity of 13.68 MAF (Million Acres Feet) which is barely enough to cover the water requirements of the nation for 30 days. This is in contrast to the 170 days and 700 days of storage capacity of India and Egypt, respectively.

As such, India can utilize the Indus as a weapon against Pakistan by threatening its precious water supply upon which the country depends. Even though India has not done this, despite having fought three wars against Pakistan and numerous periods of protracted tensions. However, it is cognizant of its potential to block Pakistan’s water supply. In a tweet after the Pulwama attack, India’s Water Resources Minister, Nitin Gadkari stated that the Indian government was going to close the flow of water from its rivers to Pakistan. This expresses the fact that India considers and is willing to use water as a foreign policy tool and as a tactic to pressure Pakistan.

This phenomenon has been expressed in the recent call by India to renegotiate the Indus Water Treaty which regulates the Indus River system and ensures an equitable sharing of water between Pakistan and India. This is another means to pressure Pakistan. While India states that the renegotiation is to clarify the procedural error in the dispute management mechanism, the fact remains that renegotiating on even that point will open up the entire treaty to changes.

For these reasons, it is of paramount importance that Pakistan develops a thorough Water Security Policy. Whilst, at the moment, Pakistan does have a comprehensive National Water Policy, progress on the targets proposed in the policy for 2018 to 2030, remains slow. For instance, the policy calls for more efficient use of water in agriculture by using new technologies such as drip and sprinkler irrigation. In some areas, there has been some development in the sector of smart agriculture. But, by and large, farmers in Pakistan still utilize the outdated and wasteful methods of the past. Similarly, the policy calls for restricting settlements in high and medium flood-risk areas. Despite this, construction continues in defiance of this provision. Incidentally, this was one of the major reasons for the devastation that occurred in Swat during the 2022 floods.

Credit should be given where it is due, however. The Policy called for the creation of a National Water Council, which would include the Prime Minister as well as the four Chief Ministers, to coordinate on the matter of water management. Such a body was created during the PTI government and has operated from then onwards. Additionally, the policy called for the building of the Diamer-Basha dam to increase the water storage capacity of Pakistan. All indicators point to the fact that construction is on time and the project is expected to be completed by 2029.

It is the need of the hour that the National Water Policy be implemented in full if the nation is to overcome the threat of water insecurity. For this purpose, Pakistan’s government needs to bring all the relevant actors, both civilian and military as well as representatives from both federal and provincial governments, to finally address this critical issue.

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