[**Wishing away water woes**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1746179/wishing-away-water-woes)

[Ali Tauqeer Sheikh](https://www.dawn.com/authors/4987/ali-tauqeer-sheikh) Published April 6, 2023

The writer is an expert on climate change and development.

Listen to article

CLIMATE change is South Asia’s foremost development challenge — and a rapidly emerging non-traditional regional security threat. India’s 90-day notice to Pakistan to initiate renegotiation of the Indus Waters Treaty could pose a development and security dilemma for Pakistan and the rest of South Asia.

India’s letter of Jan 25 was addressed to the [Pakistani commissioner](https://www.dawn.com/news/1672806/indian-commissioner-for-indus-waters-to-visit-pakistan-in-march) of the Permanent Indus Commission (PIC), a joint body that oversees the IWT’s implementation.

Instead of initiating a collaborative approach, India has opted for an inward, myopic approach that will worsen its transboundary water relations with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Nepal and Pakistan. Its insular policy will bifurcate ecosystems and divide regional climate responses when integrated action is needed for implementing the Paris Agreement.

Unless India and Pakistan, together with the international community, devise a climate-smart response, South Asia will fail to devise collaborative approaches to critical climatic challenges such as changing monsoon and rainfall patterns, glacial melt, droughts, riverine floods, cloud outbursts, transboundary flooding, tropical storms, and sinking or salinizing coastal areas extending from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal. India’s limited thinking on this issue can push millions into poverty.

By demanding its revision, India is rendering the well-functioning IWT dysfunctional. However, while Pakistan is opposed to renegotiating the IWT, India’s demands have unwittingly created a window of opportunity for Pakistan to initiate climate and water discussions with India on a range of issues, several of them reportedly stated in the letter to Pakistan.

India has opted for a myopic approach towards water-sharing.

India has based its demand on two key factors: first, the IWT’s dispute-resolution mechanisms aren’t working efficiently; and second, several new issues, such as global warming, have emerged that were not on the horizon when the treaty was signed in 1960.

Regrettably, neither issue has been raised by India or Pakistan in the PIC, which has had at least 116 meetings. Both points, if addressed, can help find ways of strengthening the treaty.

Also, not mentioned in the letter are domestic political factors behind India’s demand to modify the treaty, including the desire to stir water issues for domestic political and electoral purposes, particularly in Punjab that faces acute water shortages and groundwater depletion in almost all of its 23 districts.

This is mainly because of the out-of-basin diversion of the Indus waters to Haryana, Rajasthan, occupied Kashmir, and Delhi, that leaves precious little for India’s grain basket. The bleak picture is made worse by subsidized electricity and solarization for groundwater pumping, encouragement of water-intensive cropping and promotion of exotic fruit and vegetables.

Further, the ruling BJP has often politicised transboundary waters with its water neighbours. The Indian letter is based on the August 2021 report of India’s parliamentary standing committee on water resources on flood management and international water treaties, with particular reference to China, Pakistan and Bhutan.

The 12th report of the committee, as leaked to the Indian media, also recommended that India should constantly monitor Chinese actions on the Brahmaputra river. There are some reports that India has conveyed its concerns to China on certain upstream activities. Since both the Indus and Brahmaputra originate in China, a high-level meeting of the upper and lower riparian countries of both river systems should be planned on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

The parliamentary committee was headed by Sanjay Jaiswal, a parliamentarian from Bihar and a former president of the BJP there. Author of India — The Future is Now, he has championed a transition towards renewable energy and India’s climate readiness. Although from Bihar, which is at the crossroads of transboundary rivers from Nepal and Bangladesh, Jaiswal failed to recognise that transboundary rivers are the custodians of civilisations and bring prosperity to inhabitants.

By making regional and global climate imperatives subservient to political interests, the parliamentary report has overlooked the fact that while India may be the upper riparian for Pakistan, it is essentially a middle riparian state for the transboundary Indus River system.

The Congress party is reported to oppose the demand to revise the treaty, stating that it is one of the most durable documents between two countries. In fact, no UN Security Council member has publicly supported India’s demand for revisiting it.

This has created diplomatic space for Pakistan to brief them, the World Bank and countries and institutions on its position and the risks to regional security that a dysfunctional water treaty can pose. Given Pakistan’s high stakes in protecting the treaty, the country’s top leadership should have by now undertaken visits to at least the P-5 countries and the Middle East with whom both India and Pakistan maintain close economic and political ties.

The policymakers have not yet responded to the Indian letter, nor have they broadened the scope of consultations to go beyond a narrow band of decision-makers, most of whom are neither water experts nor diplomats, nor climate or development experts. We should recognise that the matter at hand is not simply a legal or technical one.

Like all other bilateral issues, managing the treaty is also a political process requiring complex diplomacy. Knowing that India inaugurated the Kishanganga dam five years ago, it is perhaps unnecessary to continue in the court of arbitration.

Let’s leverage this decision to rekindle the broker’s interest. Likewise, the emerging issues not covered in the treaty have created an opportunity for both countries to create an ecosystem of new agreements and additional protocols in the treaty that are equally beneficial to all upper and lower riparian states. In the present global climate, the IWT has become a global common good.

While declining the demand of reopening the treaty, Pakistan can still seek clarifications through specially convened PIC meetings. Pakistan can also seek to double the frequency of its meetings from the minimum required number in order to create the necessary energy for resuscitating the treaty.

In the immediate context, this will help downgrade Indian demands to technical and procedural levels and create a firewall against politically toxic levels at least until the elections in both countries.

*The writer is an expert on climate change and development.*

*Published in Dawn, April 6th, 2023*