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Action Memorandum

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SUBJECT: **Action Recommendation To Counteract Transboundary River Weaponization in South Asia**

Purpose: Following the April 2025 terrorist attack in Pahalgam that India blamed on Pakistan-based militias, India paused the Indus Water treaty (IWT) [1]. At the same time, China's control over the upstream of the Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo) river enables it to exercise coercive control over India as it tries to fill the vacuum left by decreased American involvement in the region. This memo discusses the specific actions the US should immediately take to prevent water competition triggering an armed conflict in the region.

Background

The Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan was brokered by the World Bank. It partitioned the six rivers of the Indus basin between India and Pakistan, giving the right to use the three Western rivers to Pakistan and the three Eastern rivers to India. [2] The water carried by the rivers is extremely important to both states. The Indus Basin waters approximately 80% of Pakistan's agricultural land and accounts for a quarter of Pakistani GDP [3]. It is also critical for irrigating 1.3 million hectares of land in Punjab, India's breadbasket.

In response to the April 2025 terrorist attacks in Pahalgam, India has signaled its pause of the Indus Water Treaty. The unilateral pause was deemed illegal by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, a ruling that India rejected in a move that effectively dismantled the IWT's dispute resolution mechanism. [2] As an upstream country, India now has the ability to divert the waters of the Western rivers and increase the draw on Western rivers for power generation and agriculture. India has the capacity to release the water during the Monsoon season when it's least useful and reduce the downstream flow during the dry season. Given Pakistan's heavy reliance on the water carried by the Western rivers, such moves are likely to decimate Pakistan's agriculture and economy.

At the same time, India is experiencing similar pressure from China. China controls the upstream of the Brahmaputra River, which is critical for agriculture and transportation in Northern India. The Brahmaputra River also represents 40% of India's total hydropower potential. [4] In the absence of a formal treaty controlling water access, China has constructed multiple run-of-the-river dams on the Brahmaputra river. While at this time these dams haven't restricted the flow of water, they can be converted to accumulate a reservoir, constraining the amount of water available to India. Furthermore, China has approved plans to build what would become the

largest dam in the world on the Brahmaputra River just before it enters India, which will enable it to restrict the water flow into India for years while the dammed reservoir fills. [5] Finally, China can (and has during the 2017 Doklam military standoff) restrict the sharing of hydrological data with India, impeding the ability to conduct agriculture in Assam. [6]

Discussion

Weaponization of international rivers in South Asia carries significant implications both for regional relations and for the US interests in the region.

Regional implications:

- Given that the Indus River basin supports 80% of Pakistan's agriculture, any disruption to the river flow will result in a severe malnutrition crisis in Pakistan.
- Given the Brahmaputra river's importance for Northern Indian agriculture, any restriction to the water flow would result in a significant increase in food insecurity in India.
- Pakistan has stated that any attempt by India to stop or divert the water flows of the Western rivers in the Indus basin will be considered an Act of War [7]. Given extreme food insecurity in Pakistan and existing tensions in the region, a potential for conflict is extremely significant.
- The Brahmaputra River flows through Arunachal Pradesh, a site of a military standoff between India and China. Indian military personnel rely on local agriculture for provisions and depend on the river for transport (via Bangladesh) of goods bypassing the vulnerable and congested Siliguri Corridor. China restricting the water flow has a very strong potential of provoking India into military action.
- India's suspension of the IWT and China's actions on the Brahmaputra undermine the potential for regional cooperation on other issues. Given the importance of the rivers for the region, any discussion not resolving downstream countries' concern is likely to end at an impasse.

US interests implications:

- A conflict between India and Pakistan or China and India will have catastrophic effects on global stability and supply chains. The US is heavily invested in preventing a conflict in South Asia
- As the largest democracy in the world, India is a potential market for US goods and a crucial manufacturing base that the US can take advantage of as relations with China deteriorate. China's control over the upstream in the Brahmaputra grants it meaningful coercive control over India's strategic decisions. In any potential US-Chinese conflict, India, otherwise a potential US ally, could be forced to the sidelines by threats to its critical water supplies.

Solutions

- **Mediate existing treaties:** Indian violation of the Indus Water Treaty means the 65 year old agreement is in danger. Regional and Global players should mediate between India and Pakistan and push the countries to return to the existing treaty.
- **Make new treaties:** Indus Water Treaty does not account for the increased glacial melt and groundwater depletion in the Indus Basin, whereas Brahmaputra Valley Treaty does not exist. The countries should be encouraged to make new treaties that address new realities while ensuring their respective strategic interests.
- **Promote transparency and confidence-building:** Lack of information about hydrological data and other countries' water usage is a significant problem both in the Indus and Brahmaputra Basin countries. The parties should seek to leverage technological solutions to increase transparency and use technical exchanges to build trust by focusing on non-contentious issues such as disaster management and pollution control.
- **Address underlying challenges:** China and India choose to leverage the water control to achieve their geopolitical goals, which creates mistrust and resentment. Any long term solution should go beyond purely technical solves and focus on reestablishing communication among high level leadership in the region.

Recommendations

- **Utilize Financial Leverage to Enforce Treaty Mechanisms:** The US should leverage its financial aid and tariff policies to force India and Pakistan back to the negotiation table on the Indus River basin water. The US should leverage its position as a major stakeholder in the World Bank to compel the parties to abide by the terms of the original Indus Water Treaty.
- **Launch a Transboundary River Data Sharing Initiative:** The United States should utilize existing satellite-based technology [8] to gather hydrological and utilization data for upstream rivers and make it publicly available. This will provide an independent data source about water availability and utilization, allow the countries to better understand each other's compliance with existing treaties and moderate the mutual mistrust in the region.
- **Appoint a U.S. Special Envoy for South Asian Water Security:** Having a senior US diplomat empowered to coordinate American strategy in the Indus and Brahmaputra Basins would provide a crucial point of contact for regional governments and position the US to mediate existing treaties and help move beyond purely technical solutions outlined above.

Citations

- [1] <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/indus-water-treaty-2025-pause-cooperation-not-end>
 [2] <https://www.britannica.com/event/Indus-Waters-Treaty>

- [3] <https://www.ikashmir.net/geography/chapter2.1.html>
- [4] <https://cwc.gov.in/en/brahmaputra-barak-basin-organization>
- [5] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gk1251w14o>
- [6] <https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/cooperation/mutual-mistrust-should-give-way-water-cooperation-between-india-and-china>
- [7] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/7/pakistan-decries-act-of-war-vows-retaliation-as-india-launches-strikes>
- [8] <https://earthdaily.com/blog/safeguarding-hydroelectric-operations-with-advanced-satellite-monitoring>