

Water Security in South Asia *Between State and Society*

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When used in an academic or policy context, “security” usually refers to the protection of state territory. However, the concept of security has also been extended to describe situations where the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of communities is at risk.¹ It is this kind of “security” wherein scholars, development agencies, non-governmental organizations, and scholars discuss the issues of water security, food security, and energy security. There has been a marked trend in progressive academic and policy circles over the past several decades to eschew considerations of state security as “old fashioned.”² Many progressives choose to focus exclusively on issues of community security through programming on human rights, stakeholder participation, and local entrepreneurship.

But the security of any community is always in complex interaction with the more traditional considerations of state security. States have the power to structure many aspects of community life, including the provision of communication and transport infrastructure, the provision of education and medical goods, the type of tax regime and how it is enforced, as well as the nature of the tariff and customs regime. The challenge before us, then, is to determine how state security is related to the broader goal of ensuring community security. With this understanding of security in mind, we can now examine the case of water and security in Pakistan.

The first major factor to consider in the human or community security context of Pakistan is the agro-ecological complex surrounding the Indus Rivers in Pakistan. The Indus River System is composed of its main stem, the Indus River, five major eastern tributaries—the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Sutlej, and Beas rivers—and one major western tributary known as the Kabul river.

¹ Christina Cook and Karen Bakker, “Water Security: Debating an Emerging Paradigm,” *Global Environmental Change* 22, no. 1 (2012): 94-102.

² Alex Loftus, “Water (in)security: Securing the Right to Water,” *The Geographical Journal* 181, no. 4 (2015): 350-356.

The first major factor to consider in the human or community security context of Pakistan is the agro-ecological complex surrounding the Indus Rivers in Pakistan. The Indus River System is composed of its main stem, the Indus River, five major eastern tributaries—the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Sutlej, and Beas rivers—and one major western tributary known as the Kabul river. The Indus and the five eastern tributaries have been modified by engineers for over a century. The British Empire, followed by the Pakistani and Indian states, have sunk billions of dollars into developing these rivers with irrigation canals, weirs, barrages, and some of the largest dams in the world.³ These irrigated fields contribute to the bulk of Pakistan's supply of food, export earnings, and livelihoods. The wheat, rice, cotton, and sugar crop is dependent on irrigation and provides food, jobs, and social meaning for over millions of people.

A second factor is the political geography of the region. The borders between the states of South Asia have been the subject of conflict and controversy throughout history. By the early 1900s, the British ruled the entirety of South Asia. British rule in the subcontinent was either exerted directly and formally or informally through proxies. In the summer of 1947, the British formally ended their Indian empire and left behind two successor states in India and Pakistan. Pakistan was a political geographical oddity, for it consisted of two wings: one along the western border of India—which was called West Pakistan until 1971 and is simply “Pakistan” today—and one along the eastern border of India—which was called East Pakistan until 1971 and is “Bangladesh” today.

The two factors described above are important to keep in mind as we identify policy interventions that can help make state security work to enhance community security in South Asia and especially Pakistan. The western border between India and Pakistan divided the Indus Basin into Indian and Pakistani parts.

The British built an irrigation system along the rivers to be operated as an integrated unit.⁴ However, with the independence of Pakistan and India, the irrigation system became a source of conflict and international controversy. At the root of this controversy is the fact that India became the “upstream riparian” on the Indus relative to Pakistan, which became the “downstream riparian.” This means that Indian territory is located at a higher elevation than Pakistani territory. Therefore, the river water flows through India before it reaches Pakistan and, consequently, water diverted for consumptive use in India is not available for use in Pakistan, ensuring a classic situation of uneven power over natural resources.

Moreover, within the federation of Pakistan, the province of Punjab is upstream relative to the province of Sindh. Thus, the upstream/downstream dynamics and the boundaries of administrative and political boundaries shape the political geography of the river.

³ Majed Akhter, “The Hydropolitical Cold War: The Indus Waters Treaty and State Formation in Pakistan,” *Political Geography* 46 (2015): 65-75.

⁴ Aloys Arthur Michel, *The Indus Rivers: A Study of the Effects of Partition* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1967), 595.

This brings me to discuss two policy areas where water can be considered through the interaction of state and community security.

Land reform is the first policy area that brings together state security and community security around issues of water. Land reform is vital to the long term integrity, legitimacy, and prosperity of the communities that depend on the Indus. Relative to East Asian states, land reform in South Asia—especially in Pakistan—has been weakly formulated and ineffectively implemented. The property regime currently in effect in Pakistan was inherited from the British Imperial state with only minor changes. When the British annexed the provinces of Punjab in the mid-nineteenth century, they introduced private property in land. Before this, while there had certainly been dominant and subordinate agrarian classes, this uneven power was not primarily rooted in the institution of private property in land.⁵

The British granted private ownership in land to their allies amongst dominant kin groups, the Sufi clergy, and the military. However, instead of allowing a truly competitive market in private land to develop, the British imperial state froze the process that they had instituted by passing the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1901. This act forbade “non-agricultural castes” from alienating land from “agricultural castes.”⁶ This guaranteed that the social groups amongst which the British had cultivated loyalty could manage to hold onto their land even in the face of competitive pressures, and thus effectively remain in power in the countryside. In return, these powerful landed elites maintained peace in the countryside and asserted a powerful hold over Pakistan’s rural masses.⁷

Over the past century, this basic system that links private property in land to state power has remained in place—despite the ostensible rupture of formal independence in 1947. Other powerful sectors of Pakistani society such as the military and industrial classes have also entered the ranks of landowners through marriage and investment. Many people in Pakistan share the perception that the state is under the control of a corrupt group of landed elites. This perception of corruption and illegitimacy makes the state vulnerable to armed and ideological attack from right-wing extremists like the Taliban. This in turn creates economic instability in the country and makes the state elite unable to focus on the goal of long term inclusive development. Thus, inequality in landownership is a major factor in the inability of the Pakistani state to function as a democratic entity committed to inclusive development.

The second policy area where state security and community security comes together around water is the democratic self-determination of regions. In domestic terms, there is intense competition between the provinces of Pakistan over the resources of the

⁵ David Gilmartin, *Blood and Water: The Indus River Basin in Modern History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 190-191.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Indus Rivers. This tension exists despite the signing of the Indus Water Accord in 1991, which declared a formula for the distribution of Indus waters between the provinces of Pakistan.⁸ In international terms, the Indus has been a huge topic of controversy between Pakistan and India for more than a decade after their independence. The signing of the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 and the Indus Basin Development Fund Agreement of 1960, both of which were mediated by the World Bank, brought a measure of state security for Pakistan and India by bringing in billions of dollars of hydraulic engineering investment into the region.⁹ However, this state security was bought by Indian, Pakistani, and international diplomatic and development elites at a considerable cost: the right for Kashmiri self-determination.

The Kashmir issue is inextricable from the international politics of the Indus because the three largest rivers in the system—the Indus main stem, the Jhelum, and the Chenab—flow through Kashmir before entering Pakistani territory. This means that control of Kashmiri territory is not, as most analysts normally suspect, only about religious passions but also about control of precious fresh water in the highlands for the benefit of lowland landscapes dominated by irrigated agriculture. After in depth examination of the Indus Waters Treaty and the Indus Basin Development Fund Agreement negotiation, it is clear that the political question of Kashmir was explicitly put aside to achieve what political elites understood as state security for Pakistan and India.¹⁰

About sixty years after the signing of the Indus Water Treaty, the territorial dispute over Kashmir is still raging on, with India controlling roughly two-thirds of the disputed territory and Pakistan controlling the remainder. Both the Pakistani and Indian states deploy thousands of troops in Kashmir and maintain special control over access to and mobility within the region. India and Pakistan also withhold full and equal constitutional status for Kashmir within their respective state apparatuses. Insurgency, proxy wars, and counterinsurgency have been rife in Kashmir for decades. For many people living in the region of Kashmir, the rhythms of ordinary life are repeatedly and violently interrupted. Kashmiris were given no formal voice in the negotiations of the Indus Waters Treaty. Thus one glaring feature of the politics of the Indus in South Asia is that state security has been achieved at the cost of considerable community security.

To effectively leverage state security so that it furthers community security, the international consensus around the Indus Waters Treaty must be revisited. The Kashmir dispute must be understood as part and parcel of the geopolitics of the Indus, for the simple reason that much of the waters of the Indus system flow through Kashmir. Although political elites in both Pakistan and India seem content with the status quo in Kashmir, this should not be sufficient for people who are concerned with the question of community security in South Asia.

⁸ Akhter, "The Hydropolitical Cold War," 65-75.

⁹ Majed Akhter, "Infrastructure Nation: State Space, Hegemony, and Hydraulic Regionalism in Pakistan," *Antipode* 47, no. 4 (2015): 849-870.

¹⁰ Majed Akhter, "The Geopolitics of Infrastructure: Development, Expertise, and Nation on the Indus Rivers," PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2013.

Community security is best achieved when political systems of rule and governance are responsive to the needs and desires of individuals and groups. This type of responsiveness and accountability is the bread and butter of democratic statecraft and it cannot be achieved under conditions of large military and police presence and without constitutional equality. Approaching the politics of the Indus from a critical perspective, instead of an approach favoring the status quo, makes it necessary to revisit the question of Kashmir. Also, we must approach this question not only in terms of state security, but also in terms of community security. This will not be an easy task, but it is essential to begin it with representation from across the breadth and depth of South Asian, and especially Kashmiri, society.

Both of the policy interventions recommended here are not new. Indeed, political proposals like these have fired the imaginations of generations of progressive nationalists in South Asia who sought to make state security work for the broader goals of community and social security. Instead of discarding these ideas in favor of an exclusive focus on community security, we should revisit these policy ideas as we try to consider the complex interactions of state and community security.

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