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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Case for Updating the Indus Waters Treaty

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THE LIFT LINE

A treaty signed in 1960 was built for the hydrology and politics of 1960. Sixty-six years later, glaciers are retreating, monsoons are erratic, storage needs have grown, and a neighbour continues to export terrorism across the border. India holding the **Indus Waters Treaty** in **abeyance** after the **Pahalgam** attack is not the abandonment of a river-sharing arrangement; it is the opening of a long-overdue conversation about modernising it.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The **Indus Waters Treaty (IWT)** is one of the most frequently examined instruments in India-Pakistan relations, and its status changed materially after the **April 2025 Pahalgam cross-border terror attack**, when India placed the treaty in abeyance. This gives a settled topic sharp contemporary relevance, blending international relations, water resources and national security.

The topic also rewards conceptual clarity. It lets you connect **transboundary** water governance, treaty law, climate-era hydrology and India's counter-terrorism posture in a single answer, which is exactly the kind of integration examiners reward at the Mains stage.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood; **bilateral** agreements involving India; effect of policies of neighbouring countries on India's interests.

GS Paper 3: Conservation and management of water resources; security challenges and cross-border terrorism.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **IWT** was signed in **1960**, brokered by the **World Bank**; the **eastern rivers** (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej) are allocated to India, and the **western rivers** (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab) largely to Pakistan; the **Permanent Indus Commission** has a Commissioner from each country; the dispute-resolution ladder runs from the Permanent Indus Commissioner to a **Neutral Expert** and then a **Court of Arbitration**; India retains limited **run-of-the-river hydropower** rights on the western rivers.

For **Mains**, argue that the 1960 treaty needs modernisation for hydrology, storage and security realities, and that India links any normalisation to a verifiable end to cross-border terrorism.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The **Indus Waters Treaty**, signed in September 1960 by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and President Ayub Khan and brokered by the **World Bank**, is often cited as one of the world's most durable water-sharing agreements, having survived three wars. It allocated the three **eastern rivers** to India for unrestricted use and reserved the three **western rivers** largely for Pakistan, while allowing India non-consumptive uses including **run-of-the-river hydropower** on the western rivers. Disputes were to be settled through a graded mechanism: bilateral resolution in the **Permanent Indus Commission**, escalation to a **Neutral Expert** for technical differences, and a **Court of Arbitration** for legal disputes.

The equilibrium frayed over the Kishanganga and Ratle projects, where Pakistan simultaneously sought a Neutral Expert and a Court of Arbitration, and India objected to parallel proceedings. India had already sought to renegotiate the treaty. Then came the terror dimension. Following the **April 2025 Pahalgam cross-border terror attack**, the Government of India placed the treaty **in abeyance**, taking the clear official position that a treaty premised on good faith and friendly relations cannot function normally while the other party sponsors terrorism. India has stated that **Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India** and that normalisation is **contingent** on Pakistan ending cross-border terrorism.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The core issue is whether a treaty designed for mid-twentieth-century assumptions can serve India's twenty-first-century needs, and how the security context reshapes India's approach to it.

Hydrology Has Changed

The treaty assumed relatively stable flows. Climate change has altered the picture: **glacier retreat**, shifting monsoons and more extreme flood-and-drought cycles mean historical allocations no longer map neatly onto present realities. A modernised treaty would build in data-sharing, flood management and climate adaptation that 1960 could not anticipate.

Storage and Full Utilisation

India has historically under-utilised even its permitted entitlements, and its **run-of-the-river** design constraints on the western rivers limit storage. Updating the framework and completing eastern-river infrastructure would let India use its full lawful share, an economic and strategic **imperative** for Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh and Punjab.

Security as the Governing Condition

A river treaty cannot be quarantined from the relationship around it. India's official stand is that the abeyance is **justified** given cross-border terrorism, and that the treaty's normal operation cannot be delinked from Pakistan's conduct.

FEATURE	1960 TREATY	MODERNISATION NEED
Rivers to India	Ravi, Beas, Sutlej (eastern)	Full utilisation of entitlement
Rivers to Pakistan	Indus, Jhelum, Chenab (western)	Non-consumptive rights clarified
Hydrology basis	Stable historical flows	Climate-era data and flood-sharing
Dispute mechanism	Commissioner, Neutral Expert, Court of Arbitration	End to parallel proceedings
Security linkage	Not addressed	Abeyance tied to ending terrorism

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read the treaty on two axes at once: the **technical** axis of hydrology, storage and dispute design, and the **strategic** axis of the wider bilateral relationship and cross-border terrorism. A durable arrangement must be technically fair and strategically credible. Apply the **good-faith test**: treaties assume cooperative intent, and where one party sponsors terror, the injured party is entitled to review the bargain. Then apply the **climate-realism test**: any modernised framework must be built for the flows of the coming decades, not the flows of 1960.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

1960 treaty, World Bank brokered -> eastern rivers to India, western to Pakistan -> Kishanganga and Ratle disputes strain the mechanism -> Pahalgam terror attack (April 2025) -> India places treaty in abeyance -> official stand: normalisation tied to ending cross-border terrorism -> climate change alters hydrology -> case for a modernised treaty on storage, data and security

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Modernise, do not merely restore.** Use the abeyance as **leverage** to seek a renegotiated framework that incorporates climate-era hydrology, joint flood management and updated storage provisions, rather than reverting to the 1960 terms unchanged.
- 2 **Fully utilise lawful entitlements.** Accelerate eastern-river infrastructure and permitted run-of-the-river projects on the western rivers so India realises its full treaty share for J&K, Ladakh and Punjab.
- 3 **Hold the security line.** Maintain the official position that normalisation is contingent on a verifiable end to cross-border terrorism, and that Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India.

- 4 **Keep the technical channel professional.** Preserve institutional expertise and data capacity in the Permanent Indus Commission so that, when talks resume, India negotiates from technical strength.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has tested transboundary water and India-Pakistan relations (2021: “Discuss the potential threats of Cyber attack...” aside, 2020 and 2016 on India’s neighbourhood policy; water-sharing disputes recur in GS3). This editorial updates the theme with the treaty’s abeyance and the climate-hydrology case for modernisation.

Practice question: “The Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 must be modernised for the realities of climate change, storage needs and cross-border security.” Critically examine, keeping in view India’s decision to hold the treaty in abeyance. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: Indian Express, Ministry of External Affairs

Source: The Case for Updating the Indus Waters Treaty — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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