

# The Hydraulic Hegemon: India's Weaponization of Transboundary Rivers

Written by Md Tariqul Islam Tanvir and Shafi Md Mostofa

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## The Hydraulic Hegemon: India's Weaponization of Transboundary Rivers

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/09/20/the-hydraulic-hegemon-indias-weaponization-of-transboundary-rivers/>

MD TARIQUL ISLAM TANVIR AND SHAFI MD MOSTOFA, SEP 20 2025

Bangladesh's push for a longer, more predictable Ganges Water Treaty has brought India's upstream tactics back into sharp focus. In a region where water scarcity and climate stress are escalating, control over transboundary rivers is no longer just a matter of resource management—it's a lever of geopolitical influence. The recent experiences of Bangladesh and Pakistan reveal how India's hydrological dominance can be used to sideline treaty norms, assert territorial claims, and reshape regional diplomacy. What were once shared lifelines are now contested flows in South Asia's shifting power dynamics. That said, citing the April 22 attack on tourists in Indian-administered Kashmir as sustained cross-border terrorism by Pakistan, India suspended a 65-year-old water-sharing treaty between the two countries.

The suspension of the agreement presents a serious threat to Pakistan's economy, where agriculture makes up nearly a quarter of the GDP. Much of the country's irrigation, hydropower, electricity supply, and overall development critically depend on the Indus River basin. When the monsoons arrived, the devastating floods killed over 900 and affected four million. Pakistani officials have directly blamed India for manipulating water flows from upstream rivers, alleging that deliberate releases from Indian dams exacerbated the monsoon rains and turned a seasonal weather event into a catastrophic deluge that killed hundreds. However, hydrology and climate experts urge a focus on the broader picture, noting that while water politics may play a role, the unprecedented scale of the disaster is fundamentally driven by climate change, which has intensified monsoon patterns and overwhelmed the region's water management infrastructure.

While Pakistan faces an overt treaty suspension, Bangladesh's plight is equally precarious, characterised by a constant state of vulnerability to India's control of the rivers upstream. Bangladesh is fed by 57 transboundary rivers, among them 54 of which it shares with India. These rivers collectively form the vast Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) Basin, one of the world's largest river systems, which drains a 1.72 million square kilometre catchment area through Bangladesh into the Bay of Bengal. Consequently, as the lower riparian nation, Bangladesh is both highly dependent on and vulnerable to water runoff from India, with more than 90% of its surface water originating from external sources. Among the 54 rivers, Bangladesh and India have only one long-term water-sharing agreement between them on the Ganges.

In addition, the construction of multiple dams and barrages by India on transboundary rivers over the past fifty years necessitates that Bangladesh pursue established water-sharing agreements. In the absence of such accords, the country is compelled to persistently raise concerns to mitigate the dual threats of monsoon flooding and dry season water scarcity. This dependency manifests in the contradictory and polarizing challenges of water scarcity and flooding caused not only by monsoonal rainfall patterns and variability, but also by the water management practices of India, including planned interventions, that is, building of dams, and water diversions.

This long-standing hydrological dependency has shaped a complex relationship, and the fall of the Sheikh Hasina regime on August 5, 2025, has exacerbated tensions, causing bilateral relations to reach their lowest point in history. Following the events of the 5th of August, an anti-Indian sentiment became increasingly visible in Bangladesh. For many in the country, India is increasingly viewed not as a collaborative partner, but as a dominant actor in a

# The Hydraulic Hegemon: India's Weaponization of Transboundary Rivers

Written by Md Tariqul Islam Tanvir and Shafi Md Mostofa

relationship that is perceived as unequal. Furthermore, many people accuse New Delhi for its support towards the government of Sheikh Hasina of maintaining its hold on power illegitimately for the last 15 years through Indian geopolitical support.

Just after the fall of Hasina's regime, in August 2024, Widespread flooding in southeastern Bangladesh severely impacted over 5.8 million people in 11 districts. The floods were notable for their sudden start, large size, and strength. An official report from the National Disaster Response Coordination Centre (NDRCC) on September 3, 2024, states that the disaster resulted in 71 deaths, which included 45 men, 7 women, and 19 children. Bangladesh has accused India of opening a dam's floodgates without prior warning. The interim government and political establishment in Bangladesh have officially blamed India for the resulting flooding. The issue sparked student protests on university campuses, where demonstrators chanted anti-India slogans.

International water law for transboundary resources is governed by core principles: equitable and reasonable utilization ensures shared and fair water use among all riparian states; the obligation not to cause significant harm requires preventing substantial damage to co-riparian states; prior notification mandates informing and consulting on projects that may affect shared waters, and so on. However, India's actions represent a direct assault on international water law. By unilaterally suspending the Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan, India violated the core principle of good faith cooperation, treating a binding agreement as a political tool instead of a foundation for stability.

The allegations of manipulating water flows—whether through deliberate releases during monsoons or a failure to warn Bangladesh—breach the fundamental obligation not to cause significant harm. This turns shared rivers into instruments of punishment. Furthermore, India's control over upstream infrastructure denies Bangladesh its right to equitable and reasonable utilization, creating a cycle of scarcity and flooding dictated by a single power. The lack of prior notification before releasing water exemplifies a blatant disregard for this legal duty and for downstream nations' safety. These actions move the region from uneasy cooperation to overt hydrological coercion, threatening the legal framework that governs shared resources and escalating the risk of resource-driven conflict.

India's recent actions mark a critical juncture in South Asian geopolitics. The weaponization of water moves the region from a paradigm of uneasy cooperation to one of overt hydrological coercion. This threatens not only the livelihoods of millions in Pakistan and Bangladesh but also the very foundations of international law that govern shared resources. The world must recognize that water conflicts are not future possibilities; they are unfolding now. Without a renewed commitment to equitable sharing, transparency, and binding multilateralism, South Asia's already volatile politics risks being submerged by a tide of resource-driven conflict.

---

## About the author:

**Md Tariqul Islam Tanvir** is an Erasmus scholar in the International Master in the Central & East European, Russian & Eurasian Studies program at the University of Glasgow.

**Shafi Md Mostofa** is Associate Professor at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Democracy Institute of Central European University, Hungary and Adjunct Lecturer at the University of New England, Australia.