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Q18

Present an account of the Indus Water Treaty and examine its ecological, economic and political implications in the context of changing bilateral relations.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · GS I · 12 marks · World's Physical Geography

Salient features of world's physical geography.

Core demand of the question

- Give an account of the Indus Waters Treaty
- Examine its ecological, economic, and political implications as India-Pakistan ties change

Revision summary

- **The 1960 Indus Waters Treaty split six rivers:** Ravi-Beas-Sutlej to India, Indus-Jhelum-Chenab to Pakistan with limited Indian uses.

A **Permanent Commission** and Neutral Expert or arbitration handle disputes.

Ecology now includes glacier change, sediment, and delta stress the Treaty barely names.

Economies of Pakistani irrigation and Indian eastern-river commands plus J&K hydro rest on the bargain.

Wars did not kill the Treaty, but terror politics and storage fights have made every project a diplomatic event.

Introduction

The Indus Waters Treaty, signed in 1960 with the World Bank as a broker, divided the Indus system between India and Pakistan. It has outlived wars, yet climate stress, storage politics, and a harder bilateral climate now test every clause.

Body

Account of the Treaty

- The Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej form a shared basin born in Tibet and the Himalaya and draining largely through Pakistan to the Arabian Sea.
- After Partition, canal headworks and fields were split; the 1948 stoppage of water to Pakistani canals showed that a legal regime was urgent.
- The Treaty allocates the three eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej) to India for unrestricted use, and the three western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab) to Pakistan, with India allowed limited non-consumptive uses such as run-of-river hydropower, navigation, and specified irrigation.
- A **Permanent Indus Commission** meets, shares data, and tries to settle questions; differences can go to a Neutral Expert and disputes to a Court of Arbitration, with the World Bank in a procedural role.
- India built the Bhakra-Nangal, Pong, and Ranjit Sagar storages on the eastern rivers; Pakistan built **Tarbela and Mangla** on the western system, aided by replacement works funded after 1960.

Ecological implications

- Dividing a basin by river rather than by integrated environmental flow can starve some eastern-river stretches in India once diversions are complete, and it can ignore the delta's needs in Sindh.
- Glacier retreat, monsoon swings, and extra sediment change the volume the Treaty assumed in the 1950s, so both sides face floods and lean-season stress the text did not design for.
- Hydropower and storage on western rivers raise questions of fish, sediment, and downstream timing even when the design is run-of-river.
- Climate adaptation would need joint catchment care; hostility makes that ecology the first casualty.

Economic implications

- For Pakistan, the western rivers are the backbone of irrigation in Punjab and Sindh; any perceived cut is an existential farm and food issue.
- For India, the eastern rivers water Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan, while limited western-river hydropower is important for Jammu and Kashmir's electricity and flood moderation.
- Projects such as **Baglihar and Kishanganga** showed that design details (pondage, spillways, diversions) have large rupee and megawatt effects and therefore become legal fights.
- A Treaty that still delivers water on time is cheaper than a water war; a Treaty that is frozen can delay Indian storage and Pakistani certainty alike.

Political implications in a changing relationship

- The Treaty survived 1965, 1971, and Kargil, which made it a rare piece of functional bilateralism.
- After terror attacks and a general freeze in talks, New Delhi has spoken of reviewing or using its full Treaty rights, which Islamabad reads as coercive hydrology.
- Neutral Expert and arbitration tracks have themselves become political when one party resists a forum.
- Third-party World Bank involvement is a political cushion and also a reminder that the basin is not a purely bilateral quiet pond.
- Any collapse would hurt farmers first and would draw in China as an upstream Indus state, widening the geopolitics.

Way forward for the answer

- Narrate 1960 allocation and dispute machinery, then judge ecology (climate and delta), economy (irrigation and hydro), and politics (resilience versus weaponisation) together.

Flow diagram

IWT 1960 World Bank -> Eastern rivers India
IWT 1960 World Bank -> Western rivers Pakistan
Eastern rivers India -> Irrigation hydro data
Western rivers Pakistan -> Irrigation hydro data
Climate storage politics -> Strain on Treaty

Conclusion

The Indus Waters Treaty gave India the eastern rivers and Pakistan the western rivers, with a commission and third-party dispute path. It still underwrites farm economies, but ecological change and a colder relationship strain a 1960 bargain that assumed more trust and a more stable climate than the basin now has.

Facts & figures

Indus Waters Treaty, 1960

India-Pakistan water-sharing pact brokered with the World Bank after Partition canal disputes.

Eastern and western rivers

Eastern: Ravi, Beas, Sutlej to India. Western: Indus, Jhelum, Chenab to Pakistan, with limited Indian uses.

Permanent Indus Commission

Bilateral body for data, inspection, and first-level settlement under the Treaty.

Baglihar and Kishanganga

Indian hydropower projects on western rivers that went through Treaty dispute mechanisms.

Tarbela and Mangla

Major Pakistani storages on the Indus system built as part of the post-Treaty replacement works.

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