India–Afghanistan Cooperation on Kunar River Project

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1. Context

- The **Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)** recently announced that **India stands ready to support Afghanistan** in managing its **water resources**, including **hydroelectric projects** on the **Kunar River**.
- The statement followed Afghanistan's plan to **construct dams on the Kunar River**, potentially **reducing water flow into Pakistan**.
- This development has triggered a **new dimension of regional tension** — what analysts are calling a possible **"water war"** between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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2. Background of the Issue

- **Afghanistan's Water Minister**, Mullah Abdul Latif Mansoor, announced that the **Taliban's Supreme Leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada**, had ordered **immediate construction of dams** on the Kunar River.
- The announcement came amid **recent border clashes** between Afghan and Pakistani forces, which caused numerous casualties on both sides.
- The **Kunar River** plays a **vital hydrological and agricultural role** for both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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3. The Kunar River System

- **Origin:** Arises in the **Hindu Kush mountains** of **Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Chitral region)**.
- **Course:** Flows through **Afghanistan's Kunar and Nangarhar provinces** and re-enters Pakistan via the **Kabul River**.
- **Length:** Approximately **480–500 km** within Afghanistan (not 5,000 km — that's likely a reporting typo).
- **Significance:**
    - Major tributary of the **Kabul River**, which merges with the **Indus River** in Pakistan.

- Critical for **irrigation**, **drinking water**, and **hydroelectric generation**, especially in **northwestern Pakistan**.

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4. Afghanistan’s Plan

- Afghanistan aims to **construct multiple dams** on the **Kunar and Kabul Rivers** to:
  - Generate **hydroelectric power** for domestic consumption.
  - Improve **irrigation capacity** and reduce drought impact.
  - Exercise **sovereign control** over its natural water resources.
- Afghan authorities have emphasized that these projects will be implemented by **Afghan companies**, asserting **economic self-reliance**.

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5. India’s Response

- **MEA Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal** confirmed that **India is open to cooperating** with Afghanistan on such projects.
- India has a **long history of development assistance** to Afghanistan, including:
  - **Salma Dam (Afghan–India Friendship Dam)** in **Herat**, completed in **2016**, providing **power and irrigation** to thousands of families.
  - **Shatoot Dam project** near Kabul (planned), aimed at providing drinking water to the city.
- Jaiswal reiterated that **India respects Afghanistan’s sovereignty** and will support projects that promote **sustainable water management**.

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6. Pakistan’s Concerns

- The **Kunar River contributes about 17 million acre-feet (MAF)** of water annually to Pakistan.
- If Afghanistan dams the river, **Pakistan’s inflow could drop by around 3 MAF**, leading to:
  - **Reduced irrigation water** for **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa** and **Punjab**.
  - **Threats to food security** during critical **Kharif cropping seasons (April–June)**.

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    - **Depletion of Tarbela Dam levels**, affecting **hydropower and agriculture**.

- Pakistan accuses the Taliban of **weaponizing water**, especially after India's suspension of the **Indus Waters Treaty** (IWT) following the **Pahalgam terror attack** (April 2025).

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7. India's Indus Waters Treaty Suspension (Context Link)

- Following the **Pahalgam terror attack**, India **suspended the IWT** — a 1960 agreement that governs the sharing of Indus River waters between India and Pakistan.

- This has already caused **shortages downstream** in Pakistan.

- A **June report (2025)** by **Pakistan's Indus River System Authority (IRSA)** recorded:

    - A **13.3% year-on-year water shortfall**,

    - **Lower releases** to key dams,

    - **Delayed Kharif crop sowing**, worsening Pakistan's **food and rural economic crisis**.

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8. A "Double Water Squeeze" for Pakistan

- With **India restricting Indus flows** from the east and **Afghanistan planning to dam Kunar waters** from the west, Pakistan faces a **hydrological double jeopardy**.

- Pakistan's over-dependence on **transboundary rivers** makes it highly vulnerable to **regional water politics**.

- Both **India and Afghanistan**, as **upstream states**, are now asserting their **sovereign rights** over shared rivers — something Pakistan can no longer influence diplomatically.

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9. Strategic and Diplomatic Dimensions

- **India–Afghanistan Cooperation:** Strengthens India's **strategic foothold** in Afghanistan and the **broader Central Asian region**.

- **Regional Realignment:** Drives a potential **Afghanistan–India partnership** against **Pakistan's influence**.

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- **Pakistan’s Isolation:** Its **military and militant policies** have backfired, alienating both neighbours.
- **Hydropolitics:** Water is increasingly becoming a **tool of geopolitical leverage**, similar to **energy diplomacy**.

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10. Broader Implications

- **For Afghanistan:**
    - Enhances energy independence and infrastructure.
    - Bolsters legitimacy of Taliban government domestically.
- **For India:**
    - Expands soft power and technical cooperation.
    - Reinforces its commitment to **regional development without direct interference**.
- **For Pakistan:**
    - Increases vulnerability to **water scarcity** and **agricultural decline**.
    - Forces Islamabad to **rethink its foreign policy** towards both India and Afghanistan.

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11. Way Forward

- **Regional water-sharing mechanisms** between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India are urgently needed.
- Encourage **technical cooperation** and **joint hydrological data sharing** to avoid conflict.
- Promote **sustainable transboundary water management** under international norms (e.g., **Helsinki Rules**, **UN Watercourses Convention**).
- India can play a **balancing role** by promoting **inclusive water diplomacy** in South Asia.

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12. UPSC Relevance

GS Paper 2 – International Relations

- India’s neighbourhood policy, India–Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, regional

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geopolitics, and water diplomacy.

GS Paper 3 – Environment / Security

- Transboundary river management, water security, and strategic resources.

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13. Possible UPSC Mains Questions

1. *“Discuss how transboundary river management has become a tool of diplomacy and strategic leverage in South Asia.”*

2. *“Evaluate the implications of India–Afghanistan cooperation on the Kunar River for regional stability and Pakistan’s water security.”*

3. *“Hydropolitics in South Asia is emerging as a new frontier of regional conflict. Comment.”*

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