

## CHAPTER 11

# *India and Pakistan: Glaciers, Rivers, and Unfinished Business*

Water Flows or Blood

—*Protest sign in Pakistan*

PAKISTAN AND INDIA are famously locked in struggle. An important cause of this enmity is each side's need for water. An important method in the conflict is Pakistan's use of militant Islamist guerrillas and terrorists as proxies against India. One of this struggle's crucial battlefields is Afghanistan.

As climate change increases water stress in South and Central Asia, the India-Pakistan conflict, already unfolding on multiple fronts, is further aggravated. The India-Pakistan conflict is not reducible to water; nor is it caused by climate change. However, water and climate are key drivers of the conflict. As climate change brings more extreme weather, monsoon disruptions, flooding, drought, and rapid glacial melting, it plays an ever-greater role in shaping the India-Pakistan conflict.

### *Water Tower Karakorum*

The India-Pakistan conflict pivots on Kashmir, in part because 90 percent of Pakistan's agricultural irrigation depends on rivers that originate in the region, much of which is occupied by the Indian military.<sup>1</sup> The conflict

began in 1947 during Partition. Under the British Raj, the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir had a Muslim majority but was ruled by a Hindu maharajah and his court staffed by Hindu outsiders.

The logic of partition was that India's Muslims and Hindus constituted separate nations. The Muslim League put this forward, and the Indian National Congress reluctantly agreed to the idea of geographic separation along religious lines. That process quickly turned apocalyptic as Hindus and Muslims turned on one another; 1 million people were killed and 15 million displaced. These intercommunal conflicts were religious in name but also involved displaced and distorted class conflicts. As a scholar of that era put it, "Communalism is more than a religious phenomenon. Its social and economic overtones appear when peasants who happen to be Muslims are oppressed by Hindu money-lenders or when Muslim weavers strike against Hindu mill owners."<sup>2</sup>

A central element in Partition was the fate of British India's 560 small, semiautonomous, so-called princely states. All were advised to accede to either Pakistan or India. Since the logic of Partition was that Muslim-majority areas should go to Pakistan, Kashmir seemed to belong there: it was more than 70 percent Muslim, and most of its trade links and communications lines tied it to that region. In one version of the original acronym that became the name Pakistan, the *k* stood for Kashmir.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, and very importantly, "its three mountain-fed rivers, the Indus, the Jhelum (which flows through the famed Vale of Kashmir), and the Chenab, join in a single stream to descend through the Pakistan lowlands and empty into the Arabian Sea at Karachi."<sup>4</sup>

Indian leaders, however, saw Kashmir as a resource frontier and geostrategic asset that was too valuable to concede—remember, along with huge glaciers, it had forests, minerals, and borders with Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, and China. As Alice Thorner, a leading historian of India, explained at the time, "Kashmir was conceived as both a gateway to greater Indian influence in Central Asia and a bastion of defense. India alone, it was argued, had the economic strength to develop Kashmir's so far untapped water-power potential and mineral resources."<sup>5</sup>

The Hindu maharajah and his court were reluctant to yield their autonomy to either state, and a three-way stalemate ensued. Then, on October 22, 1947, Pakistan made its move. In the predawn gloom, an armed column of approximately two thousand Pashtun tribesmen—the first generation of Pakistan's mercenary guerillas, recruited from the north-west borderlands with Afghanistan and led by a major in Pakistan's army—invaded Kashmir. They drove sixty miles beyond the border before meeting opposition from a small force of Kashmir state troops. The maharajah's government called for Indian military aid. As Indian troops were dispatched over the mountains by air, Kashmir's Hindu leader finally agreed to Indian control. When Indian soldiers touched down in Singar, they found the town unoccupied but soon fought approaching tribesmen. The Pashtun had faltered in their advance, as renegade groups broke away from the main column to plunder. India soon held half of Kashmir.

Pakistan immediately went on record as refusing to recognize Kashmir's accession to India, and both states publicly agreed there should be a referendum on the matter. However, in private, Jawaharlal Nehru opposed the idea.<sup>6</sup> India wanted, needed, felt it deserved Kashmir—a referendum would likely mean giving it to Pakistan. Two weeks later, India launched an assault that took two-thirds of the Pakistani-controlled territory.<sup>7</sup> By the middle of the next summer, Pakistan had regular military units in the fight.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Kashmir's leaders went with India, while its majority Muslim population began to seethe under Indian occupation, and no referendum was held. Kashmir emerged from Partition divided and occupied. And beneath the Muslim-versus-Hindu conflict lurked the issue of water.

### *Riparian Politics*

As far back as 1957, political leaders pointed to the centrality of water. Consider the comments of Hussain Suhrawardy, then prime minister of Pakistan:

There are, as you know, six rivers. Most of them rise in Kashmir. One of the reasons why, therefore, that Kashmir is so important for us, is this water, these waters which irrigate our lands. They do not irrigate Indian lands. Now, what India has done—it is not threatening—it has actually, it is building a dam today, and it is threatening to cut off the waters of the three rivers for the purpose of irrigating some of its lands. Now, if it does so without replacement, it is obvious that we shall be starved out and people will die of thirst. Under these circumstances—I hope that contingency will never arise—you can well realize that rather than die in that manner, people will die fighting.<sup>9</sup>

And so they did. In 1965 India and Pakistan went to war over Kashmir. Again in 1999 the armies clashed in that region.<sup>10</sup> India and Pakistan have conducted four wars during which Pakistan usually fared poorly. Two of them were fought over water-rich Kashmir. In 1971 Pakistan lost half its territory thanks to India. When a devastating cyclone in East Pakistan was met with a grossly inadequate government response, a secessionist movement launched a war for independence. Indian forces intervened to help them. Rebels captured ninety thousand Pakistani soldiers and helped midwife the new nation of Bangladesh.

Consider the conflict from the Pakistani point of view. Pakistan is long and thin, sandwiched between two hostile states, India and Afghanistan. It is arid with a large and growing population, most of which works in agriculture. As such, Pakistan is one of the most “water-stressed” countries in the world, and this fact helps animate the struggle with India over control of Kashmir and Jammu. The Indus and its main tributaries rise in Tibet, travel through India into Pakistan, then descend from the cold mountains onto the hot, fertile plains of the Punjab to water the nation’s breadbasket.

The Indus is Pakistan’s economic spine. Without the river, Pakistan’s stock of groundwater and impounded reserves would only last a month. No river, no country. And atop the river sits the enemy, India: huge, economically dynamic, politically democratic, internationally respected, and atomically armed. To the west, sitting upon the Kabul River, which drains into the Indus, is India’s unstable, often perfidious ally, Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has switched from monarchy to republic, from one-party communist state to multiparty democracy, but never—except during Taliban rule—has she left India's side. Imagine the stress this equation causes for Pakistan's military and political elites. Pakistan is simply overmatched by India.

### *Paradox of Scarcity*

Within this story of rivalry, water serves as a cause of both destabilization and, surprisingly, cooperation.<sup>11</sup> One of the only transboundary water agreements in Central Asia is also the least likely: Pakistan and India are united by the Indus Water Treaty of 1960, negotiated under auspice of the World Bank.

According to the treaty, Pakistan receives exclusive rights to the waters of the Indus and its main western tributaries, the Jhelum and Chenab. India is allocated the eastern tributaries of Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej.<sup>12</sup> India can dam these rivers for power, fish from them, channel them for navigation, and so on, but it must release most of the water to Pakistan. In total, Pakistan should receive 80 percent of the waters that might otherwise reach the Indus. In the 1950s, as the treaty took form, India clearly had the upper hand, but it needed World Bank financing to develop its economy. So, India agreed to terms that favored Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

Surprisingly, to date, the treaty has functioned. Why? One academic has argued that India and Pakistan cooperate because doing so is "water rational," meaning, "cooperation was needed to safe-guard the countries' long-term access to shared water."<sup>14</sup> But that tautology leaves unanswered the question: Why is conquest not water rational?

The central issue in the treaty is India's advantage. As the upstream riparian with the superior military, India could take more water. In fact, India could destroy Pakistan by turning the breadbasket of the Punjab into a desert. However, in the late 1950s, when the treaty was being negotiated, both countries needed World Bank financing, and only cooperation over water guaranteed that. Further, though Pakistan was in a weak position, India also faced significant constraints. Pakistan was closely allied to the

United States and was part of the US-backed Southeast Asian Treaty Organization. Pakistan was also growing close to China, India's rival. Two years after the treaty was signed, India and China even fought a brief war for control of other glacial peaks.

Numerous other aspects of the international equation stayed India's hand. For India to have launched an all-out war for Jammu and Kashmir and then built dams to divert Indus headwaters would have constituted an act of intolerable aggression.

Instead, India holds Muslim-majority Kashmir as occupied territory. An intifada-like popular resistance now grips the province. During the crisis summer of 2010, Indian forces killed a demonstrator or two every few days.<sup>15</sup> Indian officials in Kashmir are accused of ignoring "Kashmir's significant economic troubles, rampant corruption, and rigged elections" and of intervening "in Kashmiri politics in ways that contradicted India's own constitution."<sup>16</sup>

Rigged state-assembly elections in 1987 ignited widespread violent opposition. By 1992, as the jihad in Afghanistan wound down, some mujahideen pivoted from Afghanistan to Kashmir. The struggle for Kashmiri independence began to morph into an "Islamist crusade to bring all of Kashmir under Pakistani control."<sup>17</sup> The NATO occupation of Afghanistan since 2001 has not siphoned off militants from Kashmir but instead reinvigorated the entire Central Asian conflict system. Now the brutal tempo of drought and flooding exacerbates the tensions.

### *Bellicose Dams*

In 2008 India inaugurated the 450-megawatt Baglihar hydroelectric dam on the Chenab and began restricting the flow of water to Pakistan. The Chenab rises in Kashmir and drains into Pakistan. Pakistan tried to stop construction of the Baglihar Dam by appealing to the World Bank in 2005. The project went ahead nonetheless, after India agreed to reduce the dam's height and promised not to restrict the river's flow.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, the Baglihar Dam is only one of several under construction.<sup>19</sup> The more paranoid and bellicose Pakistani activists say India has already con-

structed forty-four dams on "Pakistan's rivers" and has another fifty-two dams in process.<sup>20</sup> India maintains it is merely harnessing the energy of the water or clearing rivers for navigation and is not impounding and diverting more than its share. Pakistan disputes this and points to the decreased flows in its rivers.

In the summer of 2008, farmers along the Chenab reported lower levels of both the river and groundwater.<sup>21</sup> Under the Indus Water Treaty of 1960, Pakistan is to receive fifty-five thousand cusecs of water. (A cusec is a volumetric unit for measuring the flow of liquids, equal to one cubic foot per second.) In recent years, Pakistan has protested that India is cutting the water flow to a mere thirteen thousand cusecs during the winter and a maximum of twenty-nine thousand cusecs during summer. This damages both agriculture and electrical power generation, which in turn harms industry and manufacturing.<sup>22</sup>

To make matters worse, Pakistan reports declining rainfall and dangerous over-exploitation of groundwater. Water tables in Islamabad and Rawalpindi decreased between 1 and 2 meters per year, between 1982 and 2000. In Quetta, the parched capital of Balochistan, the water table is falling by 3.5 meters annually.<sup>23</sup> According to Pakistan's Water and Power Development Authority, the last 50 years have seen annual per capita water availability drop by almost 80 percent, from 5,600 to 1,038 cubic meters. By 2025 that figure is expected to fall to only 809 cubic meters per person, per year.<sup>24</sup>

Now, the India-Pakistan tensions—born in part of a water dispute and exacerbated by climate change—are being displaced onto, and played out as, religious war. The Muslim fanatics of Pakistan talk of water, god, and violence all in the same breath.

In 2010 the religious militant Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, head of the Jamaat-ut-Dawa (JuD) and founder of the outlawed Lashkar-e-Taiba, a terrorist group linked to Pakistan's military, accused India of "water terrorism" because it was building tunnels and dams on key Indus tributaries. India claims this does not impact water levels. But water volumes are decreasing, and Pakistani farmers have marched, warning, "Water Flows or Blood."<sup>25</sup>

Now militants of the JuD are building a water movement. A meeting they called in May 2010 was attended by representatives of most major political parties, including the Pakistan People's Party, Jamaat-e-Islami, and cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan's Tehrik-e-Insaaf. At the meeting the JuD demanded the government stop India from building dams in Kashmir or give the "Kashmiri mujahideen" a "free hand" to address the problem.<sup>26</sup> "We have two options, either to accept India's water terrorism or wage a war against it," said senior JuD leader Hafiz Khalid Waleed. A leader of another party stoked anti-Semitism by claiming, "Israeli engineers are overseeing the building of dams blocking Pakistan's share of waters."<sup>27</sup>

### *Strategic Displacement*

The climate-exacerbated water tensions between these two nuclear-armed states also get displaced onto, and play out as, religious and ethnic war in Afghanistan. For Afghans, the enmity between their state and Pakistan is rooted in Afghanistan's loss of territory to British India in 1893, when the Durand Line, now the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, was forced upon Afghanistan's "Iron Emir" Abdul Racman Kahn. In that bargain, Afghanistan lost a large amount of its Pashtun territory. Among Afghans that wound still festers. For Pakistan the issue is India.

India has courted Afghanistan with more than \$1.3 billion in reconstruction aid since 2001. Its political influence expands via intelligence assets, a large diplomatic footprint, new hospitals, hydroelectric projects, and road building—lots of roads, some of them suspiciously close to the Pakistani border.

Pakistan wants India's ally, Afghanistan, to remain weak. So, as it has in Kashmir, it supports radical groups like the Taliban. Since the mid-1970s, Pakistan has been destabilizing its western neighbor. Even now Pakistani intelligence has links to elements of the Quetta Shura Taliban, the Haqqani network, and Hezb-i-Islami.

Ahmed Rashid details how this support continued late into the Afghanistan war in his excellent *Descent into Chaos: The United States and*

*the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.* He writes, "The Pakistani army believed that Karzai's interim government was profoundly anti-Pakistani. . . . To maintain its influence among the Taliban and Afghan Pashtuns, the ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence] developed a two-track policy of protecting the Taliban while handing over al Qaeda Arabs and other non-Afghans to the United States." The United States remained suspicious, and so the Pakistani intelligence created "a new clandestine organization that would operate outside the military intelligence structures, in the civilian sphere. Former ISI trainers of the Taliban, retired Pashtun officers from the Army and especially the Frontier Corps, were rehired on contract. They set up offices in private houses in Peshawar, Quetta, and other cities, and maintained no links with the local ISI station chief or the Army. Most of these agents held down regular jobs working undercover as coordinators for Afghan refugees, bureaucrats, researchers at universities, teachers at colleges, and even aid workers. Others set up NGOs ostensibly to work with Afghan refugees."<sup>28</sup>

In 2007 it was discovered that much of the \$5 billion the United States had spent bolstering the Pakistani military's effort to fight Al Qaeda and the Taliban had been stolen or diverted to build up the military's posture vis-à-vis India. Meanwhile, elements of the Pakistani security forces continued working with the Taliban.

When I interviewed Taliban fighters in Zabul Province, Afghanistan, in 2006, they described themselves as based in, and supported by, Pakistan.<sup>29</sup> "Pakistan stands with us," said one Talib. "And on that side of the border we have our offices. Pakistan is supporting us; they supply us. Our leaders are there collecting help. The people on this side of the border also support us." A few days later I reached Taliban spokesman Dr. Mohammed Hanif (later captured), who also confirmed Pakistani support.<sup>30</sup>

In June 2010, the ISI-Taliban link received further confirmation when the London School of Economics' Development Studies Institute issued a scathingly detailed report documenting how the Pakistani spy agency controls the Taliban as best it can—and not always with Afghan enthusiasm or even consent. Written by Matt Waldman of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University, the report described an ISI-Taliban

relationship as going “far beyond contact and coexistence.” It outlines how the ISI exerts control, deals with opposition from more-independent Taliban commanders, and has provided transportation, intelligence, munitions, fire support, and so on.<sup>31</sup>

Why does Pakistan do this?

Here is how US Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair explained it in February 2010: “Militant groups are an important part of [Pakistan’s] strategic arsenal to counter India’s military and economic advantages.”<sup>32</sup> Pakistan’s proxies strike directly at Indian assets in Kashmir, India, and Afghanistan. Taliban terrorists have killed Indian engineers, police trainers, and diplomats working in Afghanistan. In July 2008, Taliban commandos with alleged links to the Pakistani ISI bombed the Indian embassy in Kabul, killing 41 and wounding or maiming 130 others. In October 2008, another suicide car bomb hit the Indian embassy, killing 17 Afghans who were waiting in line for visas. In the autumn of 2009, men with links to Lashkar-e-Taiba attacked two Kabul guesthouses full of personnel from the Indian army’s medical and educational corps.<sup>33</sup>

### *Triage*

Pakistan security forces will not end their support for the religious radicals who make war on India and Afghanistan. There will be no rollback of Taliban-style fundamentalism and no end to the struggle over Kashmir unless Pakistan’s security vis-à-vis India is guaranteed. That security, increasingly, pivots on the issue of water, and the 1960 Indus Water Treaty is now fraying badly.