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Indus Waters Treaty: Demands for its renewal!

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In News:

Indus Waters Treaty: Demands for its renewal are not new, but what has changed now? There are two ways to look at India's recent notice to Pakistan on the Indus Waters Treaty, which governs the sharing of six rivers flowing through the two countries. It can be viewed as India's countermeasure to Pakistan's repeated objections to every irrigation or power project on the Indian side of the Indus basin. This would imply that if Pakistan drops its obstructionist approach, India might not insist on amending the Treaty. The Indus Waters Treaty is very prescriptive in what can or cannot be done on the rivers by India, the upper riparian state. But today's dams or reservoirs are very different from the ones in the 1960s. Whenever India has tried to use newer designs and technologies, Pakistan has objected, like with the Baglihar dam.

What is Indus Water Treaty?

Indus Water Treaty is a water-distribution treaty between India and Pakistan. It was brokered by the World Bank (then the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development). The treaty deals with sharing of water of six rivers – Beas, Ravi, Sutlej, Indus, Chenab and Jhelum between the two countries. It was signed by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and President of Pakistan Ayub Khan in Karachi on September 19, 1960. As per treaty, control over three eastern rivers – Ravi, Beas and Sutlej was given to India. While control over three western rivers – Indus, Jhelum and Chenab was given to Pakistan. It allows India to use only 20% of the water of Indus river, which flows through it first, for irrigation, power generation and transport. Most disagreements and disputes have been settled via legal procedures, provided for within the framework of the treaty.

How the Treaty had been implemented?

A Permanent Indus Commission was set up as a bilateral commission to implement and manage the Treaty. Its mandate is to establish and maintain cooperative arrangements for implementation of water distribution pact and promote cooperation in development of Indus water systems between India and Pakistan. The meeting of PIC is held alternately in India and Pakistan at least once every year as mandated by treaty. The Commission solves disputes arising over water sharing. The treaty has survived India-Pakistan wars of 1965, 1971 and the 1999 Kargil standoff besides Kashmir insurgency since 1990. It is most successful water treaty in world.

Why Indus River is important for Pakistan?

Around 65% of the Pakistan's geographical area including entire Pakistan's Punjab province is part of Indus basin. The water of Indus River is lifeline of Pakistan and is source of irrigation, hydro power and drinking water for millions of Pakistanis. If the water from rivers is stopped by India it can surely cut lifeline of Pakistan.

What are all the contentions in recent times?

Post-Uri Attack, Indian government suspended talks on the Permanent Indus Commission (PIC), the redressal mechanism until terrorism stops. It started reviewing Tulbul Navigation Project which was suspended in 1987 following Pakistan's Objection. It also expedites the construction of Pakal Dul, Sawalkot, Bursar Dams in Jammu and Kashmir.

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Post-Pulwama Attack, India decided to fully utilise its share of unused water from rivers Ravi, Beas and Sutlej that has been flowing into Pakistan. To utilise its full share of water, India would divert the water from the eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas and Sutlej) to the border states of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. India has initiated the construction of a dam on the Ravi river, the Shahpur-Kandi project in Punjab. The Ujh Multipurpose Project in Kathua district would store water for use in Jammu and Kashmir. River Ujh is the main tributary of river Ravi. The balance water would flow through 2nd Ravi-BEAS Link to provide water to other basin states.

Why India needs to stop the excess water flow?

- This is of strategic importance to India, given that control over river water flow acts as a force multiplier during times of aggression.
- India's plans to fully utilize its share of water under the treaty. It assumes strategic importance against the backdrop of China developing the controversial China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in the region.
- India is also expediting other strategically important hydropower projects in Jammu and Kashmir, following the reorganization of the terror-hit state.
- The Ravi, Beas and Sutlej have some tributaries whose water remains untapped because of geographical adversities and flows into Pakistan. For instance, the Ujh river.

What are reasons cited for Re-Negotiation or Renewal?

Experts on both sides agree that there have been significant changes since the Treaty came into being in 1960, and it needs to be updated. The impacts of climate change and the advancement in water storage and management technologies are cited as some of the most compelling reasons to renegotiate. Climate change concerns bother Pakistan more. One of the consequences of climate change has been a decrease in the overall flows in the Indus river system. The decline thus far is just about 5 per cent from 1960, but is expected to worsen rapidly.

On the other hand, Pakistan's population has increased by six to seven times since Independence, and is still growing at a fast pace. That means increased demand for water, and thus increased dependence on these rivers.

Accommodating New Technologies - Making the Treaty non-prescriptive on design and technology could also help in mitigating the adverse impacts of climate change on water availability in the Indus river system.

Other reasons include the need for joint management, greater flexibility in utilisation of waters, and adoption of basin-wise approach in the management of the river waters. Some Pakistani voices also hope that a renegotiation of the Treaty would allow China to become a party, which would then neutralise India's advantage. The Indus basin extends to China and Afghanistan as well.