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**Pakistan's Water Reckoning: BNU Task Force Charts the Way Forward on a Crisis Decades in the Making**

By

**Mansoor Ahmad Khan<sup>1</sup>  
&  
Arsam Tufail Butt<sup>2</sup>**

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The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization.

<sup>1</sup> Ambassador Mansoor Ahmad Khan is the Director of BNU Center for Policy Research and a former career diplomat.

<sup>2</sup> Arsam Tufail Butt is a Research Associate at the BNU Center for Policy Research (BCPR) with particular interest related to governance and institutional development.

*With India's suspension of a landmark water treaty and domestic mismanagement eroding Pakistan's reserves, an independent expert panel has issued a comprehensive blueprint for survival. The BCPR Task Force report, "Pakistan's Water Crisis: The Way Forward," was produced by the BNU Center for Policy Research, Lahore, and represents the independent views of its members.*

*Report warns water crisis amid treaty suspension, mismanagement; urges for urgent reforms and solutions in Pakistan*

Pakistan has long been aware it is running out of water. What it has lacked, experts argue, is the clarity of purpose and institutional resolve to do something about it. A new independent policy report, released by the BNU Center for Policy Research (BCPR) in Lahore, may represent the most serious attempt yet to fill that gap, bringing together diplomats, hydrologists, legal scholars, and international academics to confront a crisis that is simultaneously technical, diplomatic, and existential.

The report, titled **Pakistan's Water Crisis: The Way Forward**, is the product of *a Task Force on Diplomacy and Politics on Water* that BCPR established in October 2025. Its timing was not incidental. Six months earlier, on April 23, 2025, India had announced that it was holding the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), the 65-year-old accord that has governed water-sharing between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, in abeyance. The announcement came within days of a terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Indian-administered Kashmir, which New Delhi attributed to Pakistan. India's Foreign Secretary declared the suspension would remain in place "until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably abjures its support for cross-border terrorism." A four-day military confrontation between the two countries followed in May 2025, and bilateral communication collapsed almost entirely. For Pakistan, which depends on the Indus River system for roughly 90 percent of its agricultural water, the move was not merely a diplomatic provocation. It was a warning about what could happen to the country's food supply, its farming economy, and the livelihoods of tens of millions of people if upstream waters were ever effectively severed.

The Indus Waters Treaty, signed in 1960 with the World Bank as guarantor, divided the six rivers of the Indus Basin between the two countries: India received the three eastern rivers (the Sutlej, Ravi, and Beas) while Pakistan retained the right to unrestricted use of the three western rivers (the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab). The Treaty held even through wars, coups, and crises that would have shattered lesser agreements for the past four decades.

But tensions had been building for years before India's 2025 decision. India began developing a series of hydropower projects on the western rivers since the late 1990s, such as the 900-megawatt Baglihar dam and the 330-megawatt Kishanganga project, that Pakistan argued violated Treaty design parameters. Proceedings before a Neutral Expert in 2007 and a Court of Arbitration in 2013 settled some disputes, but the underlying dynamic had shifted: India was no longer merely using its allocation; it was accumulating upstream capacity. Meanwhile, annual meetings of the Permanent Indus Commission, the Treaty's joint oversight body, ceased after 2022.

General inspection tours had not taken place since 2019. Data-sharing had quietly broken down. By the time India formally suspended the Treaty, it had already been in functional decay for years. What April 2025 represented, the Task Force concluded, was not an isolated provocation but the culmination of a two-decade strategy.

Established by BCPR, the research thinktank of Beaconhouse National University, the Task Force brought together a deliberately diverse group of experts. Its chairperson was Dr. Moeed Wasim Yusuf, Vice Chancellor of BNU. Ambassador Mansoor Ahmad Khan, Director of BCPR and a former diplomat with decades of experience in South Asian affairs, served as Convener, while Dr. Zainab Ahmed, Deputy Director of BCPR, functioned as its secretary.

The distinguished members included Ambassador Jalil Abbas Jillani, a former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, Mr. Feisal Naqvi and Mr. Ali Sultan, international legal experts. Hydrological and environmental perspectives came from Dr. Humayoun Akram of the Institute of Environmental Sciences and Engineering, Dr. Afreen Siddiqi of MIT, and Dr. Daanish Mustafa of King's College London. Dr. Saleem Ali of the University of Delaware, Dr. Maira Hayat of Notre Dame's Keough School, Dr. Erum Khalid Sattar of Tufts University, and Dr. Syed Mohammad Ali of Johns Hopkins contributed on water diplomacy, environment, and policy. Mr. Danyal Hashmi, a water resources advisor at NESPAK with experience at WAPDA's Glacier Monitoring Research Centre, rounded out the technical side. The Terms of Reference were deliberately dual tracked: the Task Force was asked to assess both the future viability of the Indus Waters Treaty as a diplomatic instrument and the state of Pakistan's domestic water management, a sector the report describes as badly mismanaged and in urgent need of structural reform.

### **The Legal Case: Strong, But Untested**

The Task Force's assessment of Pakistan's legal position on the IWT is strikingly confident. India's arguments for suspension, citing population growth, the need for clean energy development, alleged cross-border terrorism, and changes in circumstances since 1960, are each systematically examined and found wanting. On the question of treaty suspension itself, the report notes that the IWT is "a self-contained instrument," meaning the general grounds for suspension found in the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, such as material breach or fundamental change of circumstances, are likely inapplicable. Article XII of the Treaty stipulates that any revision or termination requires mutual consent. India's unilateral action, the Task Force argues, has no legal basis. That position received external validation in June 2025, when the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled, in what it called a Supplemental Award on Competence, that India's decision to hold the Treaty in abeyance did not affect the court's jurisdiction to continue hearing Pakistan's complaints. India rejected the ruling, calling the tribunal illegally constituted. That posture, the report notes, is itself a breach: under the Vienna Convention, parties suspending a treaty are required to refrain from actions that obstruct its eventual resumption. India's acceleration of construction on the Chenab River in the month's following suspension does precisely the opposite.

Despite this strong legal standing, the Task Force is candid about a troubling gap: since April 2025, Pakistan has not mounted a coherent or aggressive international campaign on the issue. "Pakistan, despite its strong legal position, has not evolved a coherent and proactive approach," the report states, adding that the country has "not launched an aggressive narrative at the international level on the subject." The window to do so, the panel warns, may be narrowing.

### **The Domestic Crisis: Hidden in Plain Sight**

The Treaty dispute, urgent as it is, occupies only half the report's attention. The other half is devoted to what the Task Force considers an equally serious, and more tractable, problem: the state of water management inside Pakistan itself. Pakistan receives, on average, approximately 134 million acre-feet of river inflows annually, nearly 95 percent from the western rivers. By most technical metrics, this is not an insufficient supply. The crisis, the report argues, is of governance rather than geology. Water measurement systems are outdated. Inter-provincial data-sharing is limited. The 1991 Water Apportionment Accord, the domestic treaty that divides water among Pakistan's provinces, has not been meaningfully revisited in over three decades. Groundwater is being extracted at unsustainable rates with almost no regulatory oversight. Farming patterns persist in water-stressed regions that are incompatible with available supply. And behavioural incentives for conservation, whether for farmers, industries, or households, are nearly absent.

The report recommends a sweeping set of domestic reforms: establishing a national focal point with authority over both technical and diplomatic water affairs; modernizing data collection and water measurement infrastructure; overhauling the groundwater regulatory framework; incentivizing crop shifts through pricing signals and procurement policy; and initiating a structured inter-provincial water dialogue to address long-standing distribution grievances.

### **A Blueprint for Action**

The Task Force's recommendations are organized in three tiers. Institutionally, it calls for the appointment of a dedicated national focal point on water, someone who understands the technical, legal, and diplomatic dimensions simultaneously, and for a two-pronged strategy that addresses the IWT dispute and domestic reform in parallel rather than treating one as a distraction from the other.

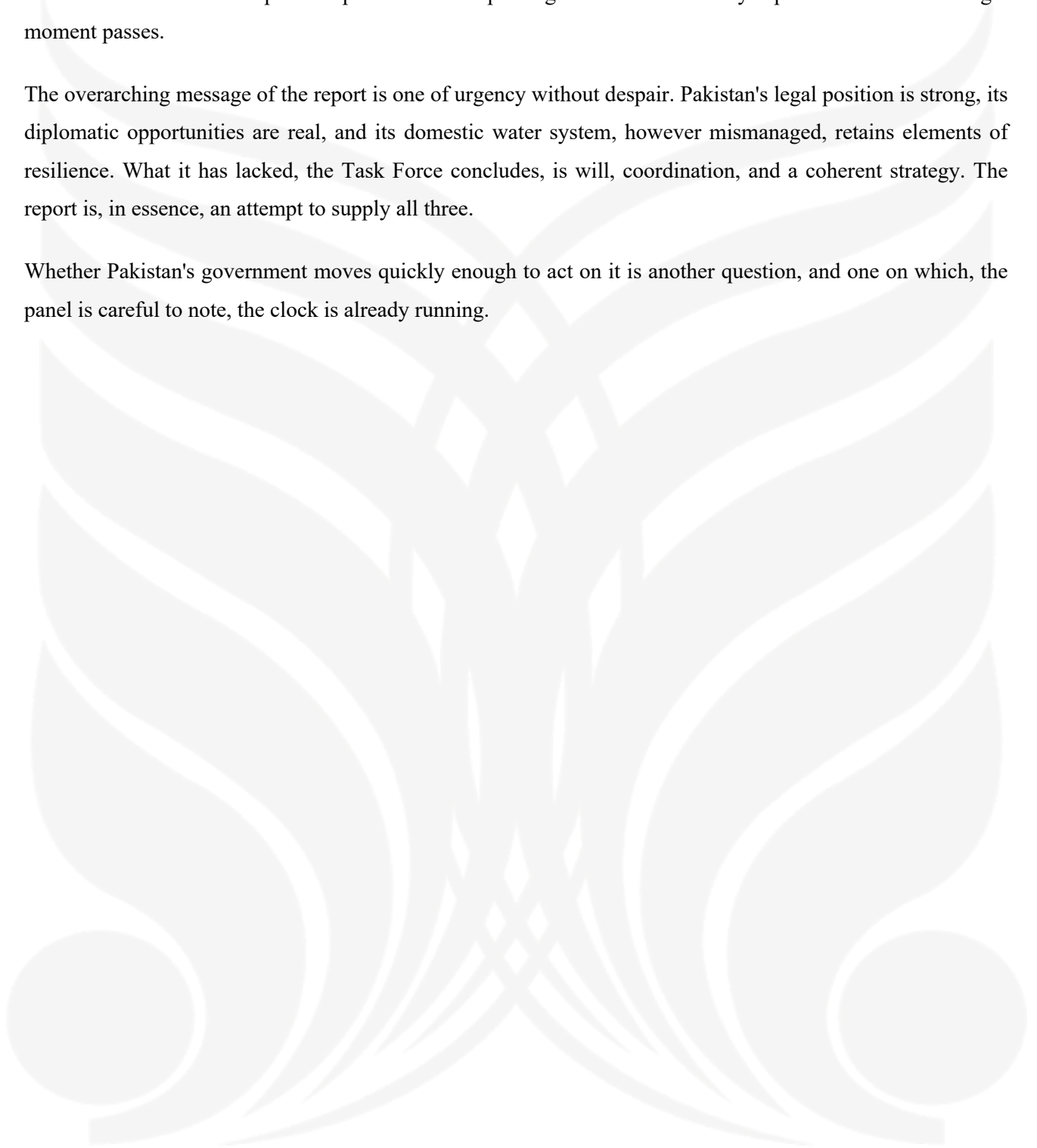
On the Treaty, the panel recommends seeking the constitution of a fresh Court of Arbitration specifically to adjudicate the legality of India's suspension, a distinct proceeding from the existing arbitration which India has already contested. It urges Pakistan to engage a team of international legal experts within the next three months, revamp the Indus Waters Commissioner's secretariat, and activate bilateral and multilateral diplomatic pressure, including at the UN Security Council, the General Assembly, and regional forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

The report also identifies a potentially significant diplomatic lever: China. Accounting for eight percent of the

Indus Basin and carrying considerable influence over India, Beijing's constructive engagement on water issues could, the Task Force suggests, serve as a precursor to a broader regional dialogue. Pakistan's post-May 2025 elevation in international standing and its close relations with Washington amid the latter's own tensions with New Delhi offer additional pressure points that the report argues should be actively exploited before the strategic moment passes.

The overarching message of the report is one of urgency without despair. Pakistan's legal position is strong, its diplomatic opportunities are real, and its domestic water system, however mismanaged, retains elements of resilience. What it has lacked, the Task Force concludes, is will, coordination, and a coherent strategy. The report is, in essence, an attempt to supply all three.

Whether Pakistan's government moves quickly enough to act on it is another question, and one on which, the panel is careful to note, the clock is already running.





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Institute of Psychology

**BNU Center for Policy Research**  
Beaconhouse National University

**Main Campus**

13 KM, Off Thokar Niaz Baig  
Raiwind Road, Lahore-53700, Pakistan  
Telephone: 042-38100156  
[www.bnu.edu.pk](http://www.bnu.edu.pk)