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The Islamabad Policy Research Institute sponsored a round table Conference on 17th July on the subject of “Managing Hyphenated Climate and Water Challenge- A case study of Pakistan under the National Dialogue Series.

The National Dialogue Series was initiated by the IPRI to facilitate cooperative solutions to major socio-economic issues and help in the formulation of broad contours of a national narrative.

The discussion was mainly on the looming water crisis in Pakistan and inevitably the management and implementing the Indus Water Treaty which shares the waters of the Indus Water System between Pakistan and India came in for discussion. The conference was more of an academic nature where specialists were called to give their opinion and there was nothing political in it.

At the end of the Conference the Conference came in with conclusions and recommendations. These were

1. Water is a commodity and must be treated as such.
2. Pakistan can ill afford to treat ‘water management’ as business as usual.
3. The State should invest heavily in storage capacity and water management.
4. The State and Citizenry must become aware of use and availability of water.

So far so good. But what followed was totally unnecessary for a serious discussion on water management or rather mismanagement in Pakistan and instead it said, "Pakistan must be prepared for India's attempt of using water as a coercive strategic tool." The issue was thus politicised even in an academic discussion!

Probably, this was added after Prime Minister of India declared after the Uri attack in September 2016 that "blood and Water do not go together." It is the stand of some researchers that the Indus Water Treaty became politicised only after the Indian PM's statement in September 2016 and not before.

This is not true. It was Pakistan's deep State that got involved in interfering and objecting to purely technical problems and a new element of a security angle was introduced in 2002 in the Baglihar project referred to a neutral expert. The issue was designed in India's favour but the then Water Commissioner of Indus Waters- Jamaat Ali Shah was hounded out of the country for betraying his country!

In the conference itself, the key note address was given by former Chairman of WAPDA who stressed the need for the country to take concrete steps to conserve water for the next generation.

The President and ex Naval Admiral Khan Hashim bin Saddique pointed out that trans boundary water disputes are "ticking time bombs" which need to be resolved diplomatically.

The World Bank Representative of Pakistan Lixin Gu pointed out that 95 percent of the country's water resources are consumed in agriculture and wanted a more resilient agricultural sector in utilizing the water.

While the discussions were purely on the optimum management of water, it was one Dr. Perwaiz Amin, a regional Expert for Stockholm based Global Water Partners who took to India bashing. He said that India's nefarious strategies will be to target Pakistan's Water Reserves and that the threat from Indian Leadership should not be taken lightly and that negative tactics should be countered.

So far, until the Indian PM's statement, India bashing was mainly based on allegations that India was stealing waters that legitimately belonged to Pakistan. When these allegations were proved to be baseless, the Indian PM's battements after the Uri attack in September 2016 came in for "India bashing"

A reference should be made of a detailed study made by two Researchers in Yale Review of International Studies of March 2019 on the "Hydro Politics of Indus Region- The Indus Water Treaty and Water Mismanagement in Pakistan.

Out of six recommendations made by the researchers one was- I quote (referring to Indus Water Treaty)

“The current problems with dam designs are engineering problems with engineering solutions. These issues should not be conflated with needless political rhetoric or “point scoring” which usually is not grounded on fact. By securitizing and politicizing the treaty, the discourse is shaped away from the true reasons for the crisis.”

It also said that tensions with India seem to distract the bigger issue of inequitable distribution and misallocation of waters internally.

The Review also suggests that the treaty was running smooth till 2002 when India pushed for bigger projects Baglihar and Kishenganga. To use their discourse- the problems arising in the construction for example in the Baglihar dam was about the level of the outlet which was placed at lower level by Indian authorities for clearing the sedimentation. Herein came the Security angle of the deep State that raised the alarm that water could be drawn any time and not for emergencies causing security problems to the State. Thus, a purely technical problem became a security problem in due course.

The authors point out that the politicization of the IWT started only after the Indian Prime minister’s Statement after the Uri Attack in 2016. This is not true either and has been discussed before. The authors themselves have said subsequently that Pakistan has viewed the Indus River System through a security lens and consequently views Indian projects as potential threat!

The Indus Water Treaty of 1960 is considered to be the “World’s most successful Water Treaty”. In India too no one ever thought of stopping even the surplus waters of the Eastern Rivers – Ravi, Beas and Sutlej flowing into Indus in Pakistan which under the Treaty, India is entitled to fully utilize the waters.

Pakistan’s crisis is only a perceived one as there are enough technical and legal mechanisms in place in the treaty for Pakistan to have complete water security. But the Indian PM’s threat has frightened the authorities in Pakistan though the deep state continues with its depredations with impunity- witness the recovery of IEDs and telescopic rifles meant to be used against innocent Amarnath Pilgrims!

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